2021

The Politics of Di/visibility: Narrative Positioning and Disability Representation in Children's Literature

Agathe Lancrenon
Illinois State University, agathe.lancrenon@hotmail.com

Recommended Citation

Lancrenon, Agathe, "The Politics of Di/visibility: Narrative Positioning and Disability Representation in Children's Literature" (2021). *Theses and Dissertations*. 1448.
https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/etd/1448

THE POLITICS OF DI/VISIBILITY: NARRATIVE POSITIONING AND DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

AGATHE LANCRENON

175 Pages

Disabled individuals are the largest minority group in the United States and Disability scholarship is intricately connected to lived experiences and advocacy, but it too often remains overlooked even in conversations that intend to bring to light historically underrepresented groups. This dissertation provides an analysis of a broad range of children's literature and its role in constructing literal and ideological images of disability. It offers a critical analysis of visuality in the following children's texts: *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, *El Deafo* by Cece Bell, *Miss Little's Gift* by Douglas Wood, *Thank You, Mr Falker* by Patricia Polacco, *A Boy and a Jaguar* by Alan Rabinowitz, *Kids Like Us* by Hilary Reyl, and *Accidents of Nature* by Harriet McBryde Johnson. These selected texts illuminate how the abled gaze is created, reinforced, or challenged through visual representations. This multidisciplinary approach draws from visual rhetoric and children's literature to reveal the affordances and limitations of different types of visual media, including picturebooks, graphic novels, middle grade and young adult novels, and films.

KEYWORDS: children's literature; picture books; picturebooks; graphic novels; young adult literature; disability studies; disability representation; visual rhetoric; visuality

THE POLITICS OF DI/VISIBILITY: NARRATIVE POSITIONING AND DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

AGATHE LANCRENON

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2021

THE POLITICS OF DI/VISIBILITY: NARRATIVE POSITIONING AND DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

AGATHE LANCRENON

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Karen Coats, Chair

Mary Jeanette Moran

Jan Susina

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Illinois State University for providing me with the opportunity to complete my study here. I would like to thank the English Department faculty and staff for helping me learn, grow, and thrive during the six years I have spent here. I would like to thank the Children’s Literature Program faculty and cohort, and particularly my chair and committee members, Pr Karen Coats, Dr Jan Susina, and Dr Mary Jeanette Moran, for their endless patience and support throughout this process. And finally, I would like to thank the family and friends who have kept me afloat regardless of time or distance and have not complained (much) about my forgetting to text them back.

A.L.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Issues concerning the representation of disability in literary texts have become the subject of increasing scholarship since the 1970s, as "the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities [Education] Act in 1975 in the USA, which integrated disabled children into public classrooms, was a facilitator in the increased portrayal of disability in youth literature and prompted closer analysis of disability imagery" (Gervay par. 2). The introduction of this legislation prompted disability advocates and scholars to become more critical of the treatment of disability in literature, and in turn the influence of fiction on socio-cultural attitudes towards disabled individuals. When it comes to children in particular, literature is often their first (and sometimes primary) exposure to or reflection of disabled experiences. The cultural implications of these depictions, then, impact children's perception of the world and others as they develop, particularly when those same messages are reinforced by guardians and education. As such, examining children's texts through a Disability Studies lens can yield a better understanding of how these texts and socio-cultural attitudes inform each other to shape the broader definition of "disability." In 2004, however, Kathy Saunders points out the sporadic nature of disability scholarship pertaining specifically to children's literature, noting that "it is unusual to find discussions of disability issues in commentaries that examine broad genres of children's literature, although these texts have often included observations on race, gender or other major forms of bias" (par. 2). Almost twenty years later, a stronger focus on disability representation in texts for children and young adults has certainly emerged and opened up more areas of potential investigation. The 2013 special issue of *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, for example, offers compelling explorations of the intersections between children's literature and

Disability Studies, with an emphasis on critical readings of select children's texts. In its introduction, Scott Pollard notes that

> disability studies has quickly established itself as a potent force in literary and theoretical scholarship [by] developing a complex theoretical and aesthetic lexicon for the study of disability in literature. This lexicon goes beyond simply offering a means of categorizing the representations of disability, inserting itself into the very concept of representation—not only to challenge ableist hegemony but, more importantly, to cripple representation and the perceptions and normative ideologies that have shaped and limited it. Thus, *to cripple* is a means of liberation, a universal gesture meant to impact everyone and change the world. (263)

The objective of a multidisciplinary examination of children's texts is, as Pollard explains, twofold: it is, first, "the analysis of the conventional representation of disability as disempowered cultural signifier; and the radical revision of norm representation into a powerful, far-reaching new aesthetic [in order to provide] a fruitful intellectual ground for new ways of reading—and teaching—literature" (265).

In fact, disabled characters make up a little over 3% of characters in children's literature in the United States[1] despite disabled people making up about one fourth of the American population,[2] a disparity which raises two connected issues. Firstly, this quantitative gap in representation contributes to the further ostracization and stigmatization of the disabled community and, secondly, children's texts may be abled young readers' first exposure to disabled experiences and therefore shape their view of disability in significant ways. As a result,

---

[1] 2019 study by the Cooperative Children's Book Center.

[2] According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

it is important to interrogate not only the underrepresentation of disabled characters but *how* they are represented as well: are those depictions accurate, diverse, and reflective of a positive conception of disability, or do they perpetuate stigma, stereotypes, or oppressive social dynamics that may be harmful for both disabled and non-disabled readers?

Most works of children's literature that address disability do so with the intent of educating their audience about a particular condition or aspect of the disabled experience, but too often rely on stereotyped depictions and oppressive social dynamics. Isabel Brittain lists the six main pitfalls of disability representation in literature as follows:

> 1. Portraying the character with an impairment as "other" than human: Otherwordly in a negative or positive sense—extremely "evil" or "good"; Likening the character to vegetable matter; Forging links between the character and animals.
>
> 2. Portraying the character with an impairment as "extra-ordinary": The character's ordinary humanity is not described but is represented either as a negative or positive stereotype.
>
> 3. The "second fiddle" phenomenon: The character with an impairment is neither the central character within the narrative nor fully developed, merely serving to bring the central character/s to a better understanding of themselves or disability.
>
> 4. Lack of realism and accuracy in the portrayal of the impairment: The author neglects to properly research a particular impairment resulting in inaccuracy of portrayal.
>
> 5. The outsider: The character with an impairment is portrayed as a figure of alienation and social isolation.
>
> 6. Happy endings?: The author fails to see a happy and fulfilled life being a possibility for a character with an impairment. (par. 19)

Children’s literature is rife with tropes that narrativize illness or disability as a linear, homogenous experience that often culminates in “overcoming” disability, all of which presented implicitly for the benefit of an assumed abled reader. In such narratives, this abled gaze thus finds itself comforted by an ableist status quo in which conceptions of disabled people as “others” need not be challenged, while disabled subjectivities are overlooked or bypassed altogether – a dynamic which seems at odds with those same narratives’ well-meaning educational goals. It is worth noting that the discourse around disability representation is certainly changing, particularly thanks to Western society’s growing concern with mainstream media representation of marginalized groups, but disability is still too often partially or completely excluded from such conversations.

As a disabled scholar of children’s literature with a strong interest in illustrated texts, I am particularly intrigued by the correlation between visual representations of disability and their effect on our socio-cultural unconscious. The concept of *visuality* which I will be discussing throughout this dissertation is one that encompasses notions of depiction, representation, and visibility, all of which inform perceptions of disability as a social category. Pictorial depictions shape our mental images of disabled bodies; textual representations articulate our relationships to disability, impairment, and illness; visibility (including the absence thereof as a distinct rhetorical act) frames our understanding of the reality and value of disabled experiences. As such, I have chosen to investigate the visual aspect of disability representation as a central question for my analysis of selected children’s books about disabled protagonists. This dissertation was born from my desire to examine various ways in which disabled bodies and experiences are articulated visually in children's texts in order to map out cultural patterns in the visual construction of disability.

In addition, what underlies the notion of visuality is the question of perspective, or gaze: who is (implied to be) looking? At whom? Where is the reader placed in that equation? In short, each of these texts position their reader with regards to the disability discourse in ways that at times align but can also conflict with the author's intended message. Such narratives generally aim to educate readers about "acceptance" or "kindness," a goal that centers individual attitudes as the sole catalysts of disability oppression and tend to ignore the role of larger institutionalized systems. In such cases, the reader is therefore encouraged to align with one of two sides, as these narratives are presented as stories of personal discovery – that of the disabled individual who comes to terms with their condition, or that of an abled character or narrator who learns to "accept" disability. However, narratives that rely on this rhetoric of visibility can implicitly discourage narrative empathy because of the distance created between the disabled protagonist's subjectivity and the implied reader's. Visuality creates, and relies on, a relationship between the text and its reader, and this dynamic interaction underpins the narrative mechanisms the enable ideological meanings to emerge.

As a disclaimer, it is worth noting that there is an evident limitation to an argument about visuality that intersects with disability scholarship. The use of visuality, whether through textual or pictorial means, either excludes visual impairment from the discussion altogether or relies on it as an intentional rhetorical device. In any case, visual impairment, although certainly included under the umbrella term of "disability," comes with its own relationship to visuality. In order to mitigate this potential issue throughout this dissertation, the concept of visuality will be discussed as it relates to the specific conditions that each of the examined narratives is articulated around. This also necessarily posits readers with physical and/or intellectual access to those particular aspects of visuality. This discussion about disability representation intends to examine and model inclusive practices, and it is my argument that acknowledging the situationality, heterogeneity, and material limitations of disabled experiences is part of this ongoing process.

In terms of theoretical framework, I am articulating this discussion of the illness and impairment as conceptualized by the interactional model of disability, a successor to the perhaps more well-known social model of disability. The social model of disability, whose central tenets were developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was formally theorized in the 1980s when Michael Oliver coined the phrase “model of disability” to describe ideological conceptualizations of disability. Up until then, the prevalent view of disability was that problems based on biological conditions were primarily, if not entirely, located in disabled individuals – a view that came to be known as the medical model of disability. The medical model therefore sought to fix, cure, or overcome disability rather than address socio-economic barriers that hinder disabled people’s lives, and any individual’s failure to meet abled standards of appearance and behavior were equated with moral or physical flaws.

The social model of disability, however, establishes a distinction between biological impairments and oppressive socio-cultural systems and institutions. The core definition of the British social model comes in the UPIAS document, *Fundamental Principles of Disability*, an edited version of which is reprinted in Oliver:

> “… In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society. To understand this it is necessary to grasp the distinction between the

> physical impairment and the social situation, called ‘disability’, of people with such impairment. Thus we define impairment as lacking all or part of a limb, or having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body and disability as the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes little or no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities.” (Oliver, 1996, 22). (as quoted in Shakespeare and Watson 3-4)

This ideological shift gained popularity quickly in the next decades due to its radical reframing of disabled people as an oppressed group, a rhetorical stance which proved valuable to disability advocacy organizations and disability scholars alike. However, although the core idea that disability is, at least in part, a socio-cultural construct, the social model has been the subject of academic criticism since its peak in the 1980s and 1990s. Shakespeare and Watson in particular describe the original paradigm shift from a medical model to a social model as a virtually inevitable move born from resistance to an oppressive definition of disability. However, they note that closer scrutiny of the social model reveals gaps which could undermine its structural argument if not properly addressed.

Their central criticism of the social model of disability revolves around three main tenets. Firstly, it often reduces disability to a social construct only and leaves little space for the discussion of impairment as an embodied experience. Secondly, it emphasizes a binary conception of disability and impairment with little acknowledgement for the dynamic socio-historical contexts in which disability is necessarily grounded. And thirdly, the social model brings to light discursive practices that do not necessarily reflect the reality of diverse disabled identities: many people with impairments do not identify as disabled, for example, which calls into question the legitimacy and efficacy of identity politics surrounding disability.

Drawing on this criticism and from a critical realism, which he argues "[demands] an analysis that gives weight to different casual levels in the complex disability experience," (73) Shakespeare proposes what he calls an interactional model of disability, or an approach of disability as

> always an interaction between individual and structural factors. Rather than getting fixated on defining disability as a deficit or a structural disadvantage or alternatively a product of cultural discourse, a holistic understanding is required. Put simply, the experience of a disabled person results from the relationship between factors intrinsic to the individual, and extrinsic factors arising from the wider context in which she finds herself. Among the intrinsic factors are issues such as: the nature and severity of her impairment, her own attitudes to it, her personal qualities and abilities, and her personality. I accept that contextual factors will influence these intrinsic factors: impairments may be caused by poverty or war; personality may be influenced by upbringing and culture, etc. Among the contextual factors are: the attitudes and reactions of others, the extent to which the environment is enabling or disabling, and wider cultural, social and economic issues relevant to disability in that society. Understanding and measuring the impact of environmental factors on participation turn out to be harder in practice than it is in theory. (Noreau and Boschen, 2010)

Shakespeare summarizes the main difference between his interactional approach and other models as the idea that "people are disabled by society *and* by their bodies", implying simultaneously that “the priority for a progressive disability politics is to engage with impairment, not ignore it” and that “impairment is a necessary but not sufficient factor in the complex interplay of issues that results in disability” (Shakespeare 74-75).

It is worth pointing out that, although some of the authors from my selection do not explicitly describe their protagonist’s condition as a disability, all of the characters in question reflect experiences that fall under an interactional view of disability. Indeed, they each exhibit an impairment or a medical condition which impacts their access to or participation in social activities. Therefore, examining these texts as examples of narratives of disability requires an acknowledgement that adhering to or rejecting the term “disability” is first and foremost an individual choice. In a mainstream social discourse where disabled and chronically ill people’s agency is too often restricted, being able to choose the language that most accurately represents how one perceives their identity and experience is essential. Although avoidance of the “disabled” label can stem from a form of internalized ableism or a lack of education about disability issues, which can lead to a desire to distance oneself from disability or to emphasize other aspects of an individual’s identity, it would overly simplistic and patronizing to claim that internalized stigma or ignorance is the one and only reason an individual may choose not to be identified as disabled. Therefore, for the purpose of this dissertation, I would like to clarify that I am not denying individual agency regarding self-identity, but instead focusing on the narrative markers present in these texts that arguably fall under interactional disability rhetoric (which does not negate preferred terminology).

Finally, I will state that disability scholarship is a dynamic field of study which is intricately connected to lived experiences and advocacy, but too often remains overlooked even in conversations that intend to bring to light underrepresented groups. Disabled individuals, however, are the largest minority group in the United States and intersect with all other identity markers, such as gender, race, ethnicity, sex, class, or cultural background. An analysis of a broad range of children's literature and its role in constructing literal and ideological images of disability would help illuminate the ways in which cultural products shape attitudes surrounding illness and impairment, both on a micro and on a macro level. Indeed, beliefs shared by enough individuals become socio-cultural attitudes that impact disabled people in very real ways through the implementation of policies and education.

In my first chapter, I examine the concept of di/visibility as I define it through a rhetorical analysis of R.J. Palacio's middle grade novel *Wonder*. The protagonist, August Pullman, has a genetic condition that is mitigated by medical procedures, but his most evident symptom remains a facial difference. His appearance therefore makes him simultaneously visible and invisible to the characters around him, as well as to the reader, whose subjectivity is constructed by specific narrative assumptions. August's twofold visuality illustrates some of the major pitfalls in narratives of disability which I intend to examine in the subsequent chapters.

In the second chapter, I analyze the ambivalent narrative positioning of author/narrator Cece Bell in her autobiographical graphic novel's protagonist in *El Deafo*. The visual depiction of her young self and the superhero metaphor she develops throughout the narrative suggest a positioning of the reader that at times belies her educational goal. Cece's visuality in the text carries different implications from August Pullman's, and the autobiographical aspect of the story also creates a different kind of narrative relationship between her real self, her fictionalized self, and her implied reader. In this story, the implied reader is expected to align with Bell's adult subjectivity, looking back at her young self and evaluating her from a more mature standpoint, thus raising some issues about the abled gaze often portrayed in disability narratives.

In the third chapter, I identify potential problems with narrative positioning in autobiographical picturebooks – Patricia Polacco's *Thank You, Mr Falker*, Douglas Wood's *Miss Little's Gift* and Alan Rabinowitz's *A Boy and a Jaguar* – where the distance between the narrator, the protagonist, and the reader is amplified by the conflation of a first-person verbal text and a third-person perspective in the illustrations. This gap exemplifies the inherent problems of the metaphor of visuality in depictions of disability by reproducing distancing ideologies between abled and disabled subjectivities rather than supporting the narrative empathy that the texts seem to encourage.

In the fourth chapter, and still building on those previously mentioned scholars' work, I analyze the narrative positioning of Hilary Reyl's *Kids Like Us*, where the first-person narrator provides insight into his perspective as a teenager with autism. This complicates and, to an extent, mitigates the effects of the narrative positions analyzed in the previous chapters because the reader's subjectivity is channeled directly through a character whose disability is part of the text itself – or, arguably, whose disability is *created by* his narrating voice.

The fifth and final chapter examines how Harriett McBryde Johnson's *Accidents of Nature* transforms the reader's narrative position throughout the course of the novel and suggests other ways to represent and discuss disability beyond limiting binary oppositions. The first-person narrator, Jean, a seventeen-year-old girl with cerebral palsy, also offers insight into her experience as a disabled person. However, she is by turns an educator and a student, navigating disability both as an individual embodied experience and as a social marker. Her level of authority changes throughout the novel and the reader's narrative position reflects these shifts, making the implied reader's subjectivity a more fluid concept than in the previously examined texts, thus offering potential leads into more accurate disability representation.

Each of these selected texts brings out a different aspect of visuality, either through text, visual depictions, or a combination of both – all choices that shape the concept of visibility itself. As a result of these narrative choices, various aspects of disability, both as an individual experience and as a socio-cultural phenomenon, are revealed, hidden, and negotiated to construct the representational models that this dissertation attempts to examine.

CHAPTER I: THE DI/VISIBILITY OF AUGUST PULLMAN IN R.J. PALACIO'S *WONDER*

R.J. Palacio's middle grade novel *Wonder*, published in 2012, is a prime example of the dual notion of in/visibility in a non-illustrated text. The story revolves around 10-year-old August ("Auggie") Pullman, who has a genetic condition of which the most obvious symptom is a facial difference. He is starting fifth grade after being homeschooled his whole life, and his newly formed relationships with both his peers and adult authority figures are heavily influenced by their own understandings of physical difference and disability. Throughout the story, Auggie's interactions with his family, classmates and teachers are often framed in terms of seeing, not seeing, and being seen. Because his embodiment makes Auggie more *able to be seen* compared to most of his peers, it also obliterates other aspects of his identity, which often leads him to feel physically seen and metaphorically unseen concurrently. The story is told in first person, first narrated by Auggie then by other characters (namely his sister Via and four of their friends). Auggie himself never provides a detailed description of his face, but other characters in subsequent sections do offer some insight into his appearance. Via, for instance, describes his face almost clinically, whereas other characters narrate their first encounters with Auggie more briefly, or even through metaphors. Additionally, and in a significant rhetorical move, Palacio offers no direct visual representation of Auggie – although a few illustrations introduce each section of the novel, they only suggest rather than depict Auggie's face. The extreme emphasis the novel puts on Auggie's appearance combined with the clear effort to avoid representations of it simultaneously draws attention to the young boy's physicality as a problem while attempting to challenge ableist attitudes, which consequently conveys rather ambivalent messages about visible disabilities.

Although analyzing a novel that is primarily non-illustrated (with the exception of a few decorative designs) in a dissertation focusing on visuality may seem contradictory, the boundary between illustrated and non-illustrated texts is a thin one at best. I am framing my exploration of the visual not simply in terms of what is depicted through images, but also in terms of what is not shown directly and instead described verbally, hidden or implied, or even absent altogether. As Gillian Rose argues, "It is possible to think of visuality as a sort of discourse too. A specific visuality will make certain things visible in particular ways, and other things unseeable, for example, and subjects will be produced and act within that field of vision" (137). Although Rose is specifically referring to pictures, her argument also applies to verbal discourse, especially when a text's narrative content *relies* on an absence or a lack of verbal description of visual elements. In other words, the various ways in which characters, actions, or ideas are rendered invisible in a text (for example by avoiding direct visual representation or by bypassing marginalized subjectivities) contribute to the construction of a vocabulary of visuality as a counterpart to pictorial information. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson also addresses visuality as a discourse, specifically examining the ways in which visual representations can shape the rhetoric of disability. As with Rose's argument, I believe connections can be drawn between Garland-Thomson's analysis of photographs of disabled people and the rhetoric of visuality at play in non-illustrated texts: "[n]ot only do they configure public perception of disabled people, but all … images of disabled people either inadvertently or deliberately invoke these visual rhetorics and the cultural responses that have come to be associated with them" ("Seeing" 339). As such, Auggie's representations in *Wonder* – both textual and in the limited amount of images – carry with them larger ideological implications about the ways people with facial differences or disabilities are expected to present themselves and be perceived.

In many ways, socio-cultural attitudes towards disability are reflected both in Palacio's original approach to writing and in her fictional characters' behaviors. Palacio herself found inspiration for her book from a real-life anecdote inscribed into this same framework of visibility/invisibility. She describes in interviews how she came up with the idea for her novel when she and her children met a girl with a facial difference similar to Auggie's. One of her children started to cry, so Palacio ushered her family away but later reflected on her reaction as an attempt to "protect the girl but also avoid her own discomfort" ("How" par. 2). She then proceeded to write a story based on that encounter, with the explicit goal to redress the situation and educate her readers. It's interesting to note that that initial prompt perfectly illustrates the main drive in *Wonder*'s narrative, namely the tension between the presence of a child with a visible difference, the onlookers' lack of recognition of that child's individuality, and the social negotiations that stem from those interactions. Just like August, the girl Palacio describes is immediately noticed/visible and rejected/invisibilized.

This chapter will therefore attempt to uncover the ways in which August is made visible and/or invisible in the original novel *Wonder* and compare this use of visuality to the 2017 film adaptation *Wonder* directed by Stephen Chbosky and the picturebook *We're All Wonders* written and illustrated by R.J. Palacio, also published in 2017. Because the film and the picturebook both extend the novel's depiction of disability in different genres and media, they also magnify some of the most problematic aspects of the original story in a way that seems to contradict the original author's educational goal, at least to some extent. While Palacio's original rhetorical move explicitly attempts to redress oppressive social understandings of disability, that objective is, at least to an extent, undermined by the implications of revealing and hiding parts of August in turn – implications which the movie and picturebook further expand upon and complicate.

Additionally, examining the way each iteration of Auggie constructs assumptions about a its audience further illuminates the rhetorical division between normate[3] and disabled children.

The Novel: Wonder or Monster?

By attempting to exclude the visual aspect of Auggie's facial difference from the first part of her narrative, Palacio draws attention to its absence – an absence which, paradoxically, is highly significant in what it reveals about body politics and bodily rhetoric and which complicates the discourse around physical difference that it attempts to transcend. The rhetoric of visuality that permeates *Wonder* thereby allows for a particularly ambiguous, flexible reading of disability in multiple ways.

First of all, the author's choice to write her story as a novel rather than a visual text directly informs the narrative, since it is also underlined by an attempt to avoid confronting Auggie's physicality right away. It is in fact presented as a deliberate choice by the first narrator, Auggie himself, who frames his own story by addressing the implied reader directly. In the first chapter, he introduces himself and states: "I won't describe what I look like. Whatever you're thinking, it's probably worse" (1). This refusal to give any visual indication about his appearance indicates that Auggie attempts to dismiss it as irrelevant information: he wants the reader to focus on his personality rather than on his appearance, which he explains is a hindrance in casual social interactions: "If I found a magic lamp and I could have one wish, I would wish that I had a normal face that no one ever noticed at all. I would wish that I could walk down the street without people seeing me and then doing that look-away thing. Here's what I think: the only

---

[3] The term "normate," borrowed from Garland-Thomson (*Staring*; "Seeing"), refers to individuals who fall within the traditional socio-cultural norms of health, appearance, and behavior, as opposed to disabled people othered by visible characteristics.

reason I'm not ordinary is that no one else sees me that way" (1). Through this very specific introduction, he is also trying to move away from what seems to be the expected narrative choice – a clear description. Palacio therefore suggests the significance of Auggie's appearance by alluding to it, but the narrator's avoidance of his own physicality simultaneously creates an unsatisfied desire in the implied reader. Readers' imaginations are engaged through narrative tension: they are trying to picture Auggie precisely because they are led to think they should not. Auggie himself acknowledges that readers will try to construct an image of him ("whatever you're thinking") and suggests that the task is impossible because their imagination is limited ("it's probably worse") (1). This creates suspense for the readers, now titillated by Auggie's seemingly carefree tone and by the missing information.

Auggie's visual appearance is therefore used at best to further the plot, and at worst as a (non-)sight that comes with a warning label. Indeed, just like his mother was warned about her son's condition by medical professionals and was eventually not as shocked as they anticipated, the readers are warned by Auggie himself. If both instances follow the same pattern, Palacio is then "preparing [the readers] for the seeing of [him]" (2) as well, suggesting that perhaps when his appearance is revealed later in the novel the shock will not be as brutal.

Furthermore, Auggie's physicality, which Palacio attempts to conceal through its visual absence in the first section, is paradoxically highlighted through its narrative significance. The plot's reliance on Auggie's appearance means that any mention of it – through descriptions, interactions, or even implications – carries important meaning, thus drawing attention to those instances. As a result, the effort made to avoid his physicality once again reinforces how central Auggie's appearance is to his social identity.

This is particularly evident when other characters and narrators first meet Auggie. School secretary Mrs Garcia drops her gaze then forces a smile when she sees Auggie for the first time: "Then that thing happened that I've seen happen a million times before. When I looked up at her, Mrs Garcia's eyes dropped for a second. It was so fast no one else would have noticed, since the rest of her face stayed exactly the same. She was smiling a really shiny smile" (Palacio 5). Via's boyfriend Justin is warned by Via about her brother's condition in advance, but he is still shocked by Auggie's appearance: "she's talked about all his surgeries over the years, so I guess I assumed he'd be more normal-looking by now. … I guess I thought her brother would have some scars here and there. but not this" (58).

The way physical or metaphorical sight is used reveals not only which aspects of Auggie are seen or unseen, but also how his disability is perceived or erased through the figurative act of looking – or, in other words, how his di/visibility is made apparent. For example, the "revelation" of Auggie's appearance mimics a ceremonial introduction both in Palacio's writing and through the characters' interactions. First, by choosing to hide certain aspects of Auggie's physicality in the first part of her story, Palacio lays a foundation that prepares readers to be introduced to Auggie's appearance – which is described in more detail later in the novel when his sister Via takes over the narration. At the very beginning, Auggie's mother recalls the first time she saw him after he was born in terms that highlight the visual aspect of his condition: "She had been preparing herself for the seeing of [him]" (Palacio 2). Indeed, doctors had been warning Auggie's mother prior to his birth in a way that parallels Palacio's delaying of his physical introduction to the readers – an introduction which thereby takes on an almost ceremonial dimension ("the seeing of him") even before Auggie's specific physical characteristics are addressed. This narrative choice mitigates the impact that Auggie's physicality may have on an uninformed reader, which therefore implies that it is something that *should* be mitigated. Choosing not to show or describe Auggie's physicality paradoxically draws attention to the artificiality of this invisibility with regards to a boy whose social life is so heavily dictated by his appearance, thus revealing the negative (rather than neutral or objective) value of this lack of visual representation.

Auggie's affinity for masks and astronaut helmets further suggests that visibility and invisibility are two sides of the same coin and function in dialogue with each other. When he explains his love for Halloween, Auggie points out the anonymity that a costume affords him (a privilege enjoyed only by normate children on any other day):

> For me, Halloween is the best holiday in the world. … I get to dress up in a costume. I get to wear a mask. I get to go around like every other kid with a mask and nobody thinks I look weird. Nobody takes a second look. Nobody notices me. nobody knows me. (Palacio 24)

In a situation where everyone around him looks equally out of the ordinary, Auggie is able to both hide beneath a mask and don a highly visible (though artificial) appearance. The limit between what is made conspicuous and what is concealed is blurred; the interaction between the visible and invisible parts of Auggie twists in his favor. This ambivalent rhetorical balance between visibility and invisibility, being both revealed and concealed by masks, costumes, and helmets, is also echoed in Auggie's wish that "… every day could be Halloween. We could all wear masks all the time. Then we could walk around and get to know each other before we got to see what we looked like under the masks" (24). On days when he is not wearing a mask or an astronaut helmet, it is the fact that he stands out from an accepted norm, rather than his condition itself, that leads to his ostracization by his peers.

The downside of using Auggie’s appearance to further the plot by introducing it as a (non-)sight that requires a figurative warning label is that it places Palacio’s depiction of his disability into the rhetoric model of the “monstrous” described by Garland-Thomson (“Seeing” 339). The “monstrous” and its seemingly positive pendant, the “wondrous,” are two sides of the same rhetoric model of disability. When disabled characters in fiction are rejected (the “monstrous”) or elevated (“the wondrous”) specifically *because* of their disability, disability becomes a narrative device rather than a characteristic or an identity. Those characters’ status outside of the norm of accepted bodies and behaviors marks them as objects of revulsion or inspiration rather than subjects with full agency and complexity – a privilege afforded to individuals *within* the norm. Auggie’s physicality for example is imbued with mysterious, hideous qualities – symbolically, he is the monster that shall not be shown, a figure that we are led to think can only elicit fear and repulsion. On the one hand, this characterization may be read as a reflection of Auggie’s own beliefs about himself, since he may have internalized some the belief that not being (or appearing) “normal” or “ordinary” (1) is necessarily negative. However, it also highlights the recurrence of those negative stereotypes in social discourse to the implied reader.

Auggie’s place in the “wondrous” model of disability is further illustrated by the fact that Auggie’s condition remains unnamed throughout the story. Mike Moody explains that although Palacio “concedes that – if pushed – she would identify Auggie’s dominant anomaly as Treacher-Collins syndrome, with a cleft lip/palate, and numerous “medical mysteries” as described in the book, … these medical mysteries … rang the first small alarm bells upon re-

reading; they seem only to be there to justify the title (inspired by a Natalie Merchant song) and aren't described in detail" (par. 6). Keeping Auggie's condition largely unspecified further defines his disability as a generic, homogenous marker of difference. It also relieves Palacio from any accountability regarding her portrayal of the lived experience of a character with a specific craniofacial condition – whether medically or psychologically speaking. Auggie's specific disability is glossed over, and physical difference is used as a narrative device to first create, then resolve, tension. These rhetorical choices seem to invisibilize disability by making it appear irrelevant to the protagonist's development (the realistic medical, psychological, or economic issues that would be associated with his condition are brushed aside, for example), while at the same time highlighting its significance as a narrative device.

Disability scholars David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder describe this recurring use of disability to signal difference in fiction as "narrative prosthesis," which refers to "the pervasiveness of disability as a device of characterization in narrative art [and] acknowledges that literary representation bears on the production and realization of disabled subjectivities" (*Narrative Prosthesis* 9). The description of Auggie as a "wonder" throughout the narrative (and indeed in its very title) falls under the seemingly more positive side of the monstrous/wondrous binary, but still reinscribes his position as an outcast and a narrative tool: his entire identity revolves around his appearance, which is used to inspire, to teach, and more generally to serve other characters' development more significantly than his own. Throughout his own story, as narrated by himself and the people closest to him, Auggie paradoxically displays little agency or will of his own. As disability activist Mike Moody points out, "Stuff happens *to* [him]. Active, positive actions aren't Auggie's to take. Plenty *happens* to him that is positive – he makes friends, he earns respect, he experiences a "seismic shift" [Palacio 86] in his social standing following a climactic incident at camp – but it is rarely his decision or intended action which causes it" (Moody par. 15). Although Auggie is characterized as humble and selfless because he rarely takes initiative, asserts dominance, or even expresses strong opinions, those apparent qualities actually serve to disguise a lack of agency in his own narrative. As a result, he is symbolically stripped of a sense of control, choice, and responsibility over his life and instead remains an idealized disabled stereotype.

Auggie's statement in the first chapter, "Here's what I think: the only reason I'm not ordinary is that no one else sees me that way" (Palacio 1), draws attention once again to figurative sight and illustrates the ambivalence of this rhetoric of the "wondrous": neither characters who fear or avoid him nor characters who praise him consider Auggie "ordinary" – he is positioned as extraordinary *by nature*. This recurring trope of the heroic disabled person in disability representation is referred to as the "supercrip," often framed through rhetorics of horror, pity, and inspiration. In her assessment of this stereotypical figure, Sami Schalk explains that "these representations [of supercrips as glorified, inspirational disabled people typically] rely on concepts of overcoming, heroism, inspiration, and the extraordinary. Additionally, most scholarship also mentions how these representations focus on individual attitude, work, and perseverance rather than on social barriers, making it seem as if all effects of disability can be erased if one merely works hard enough" (73). Under this deceivingly empowering model, disabled people are praised rather than feared for their exceptionalism, but still firmly located outside of the accepted social norm. Auggie is constantly described and treated as an extraordinary child, most notably when he receives an award and a standing ovation during his school graduation ceremony although he himself admits that he did not *do* anything to deserve it:

> I wasn’t sure why I was getting this medal, really. No, that’s not true. I knew why. It’s like people you see sometimes, and you can’t imagine what it would be like to be that person, whether it’s somebody in a wheelchair or somebody that can’t talk. Only, I know that I’m that person to other people, maybe to every single person in that auditorium. To me, though, I’m just me. An ordinary kid. But hey, if they want to give me a medal for being me, that’s okay. I’ll take it. I didn’t destroy a Death Star or anything like that, but I did just get through the fifth grade. (Palacio 94)

While Palacio attempts to frame this heavily didactic comment as humility, the greater implication is that Auggie did not exercise his agency or achieve anything more than an able-bodied child would be expected to, so this eventual reward seems rather patronizing. Additionally, it also reinforces the assumption that the implied reader has no experience of physical difference. Auggie’s comment could be read as an able-bodied author indirectly addressing able-bodied readers under the guise of a fictional disabled narrator that serves only as an artificial catalyst for ableist discourse, thereby bypassing disabled embodiment altogether – a narrative process which further invisibilizes disability under the pretense of celebrating it. This is also emphasized by the fact that Auggie (or, through him, Palacio) refuses to use the term “disability” to refer to his condition, possibly a direct consequence of internalized negative perceptions of disability. In fact, when Auggie states that he may be an inspiration to others, Palacio does compare him to wheelchair users and speech-impaired people, suggesting that she is aware of her character’s disabled identity but chooses to distance him from it. Furthermore, centering Auggie’s entire subjectivity on his facial difference may reinforce the construction of disability as a one-dimensional and all-encompassing identity.

On the other hand, Auggie's sister, Via, utters a more ambiguous, and perhaps more subversive, statement which practically mirrors Auggie's earlier comment: "Here's what I think: we've all spent so much time trying to make August think he's normal that he actually thinks he is normal. And the problem is, he's not" (28). Via here seems to condemn the compensation model of disability in favor of the accommodation model; in other words, she is raising a crucial question: does treating Auggie in a special way to make him feel normal equate to treating Auggie normally? This question challenges disability exceptionalism by highlighting some of the contradictions in the mainstream discourse around disability. Via further embodies those paradoxes when she describes seeing Auggie after being away from him for a few weeks: "I remember very vividly stepping through the door and seeing August running over to welcome me home, and for this tiny fraction of a moment I saw him not the way I've always seen him, but the way other people see him. [T]here were two Augusts: the one I saw blindly, and the one other people saw" (27). This "seeing blindly" oxymoron is representative of the rhetoric of in/visibility at play throughout the novel. It encapsulates the questions Palacio asks of her readers by pointing out paradoxes about the perception and construction of disability. This contradiction of terms results in unstable meaning, which then requires readers to actively engage in critical positioning by projecting a subjective meaning to the phrase and thereby generates productive metacognitive reflection. The implied reader is no longer staring at Auggie; they are looking at *how they look at him*. Garland-Thomson aptly states that "the word [*wonder*] names both the desire to render the strange familiar and the strange thing itself" (*Staring* 64). Consequently, although Auggie's characterization as a "wonder" falls short of truly challenging assumptions about disability, a subtle rhetorical shift can turn Palacio's title into an injunction and allow readers to engage into a more critical reading. By constantly refusing to ascribe fixed meanings to Auggie's visuality, visibility, or vision, a more resistant reading of the narrative suggests that disability can be represented in more open, flexible ways and *produce* rather than hold meaning. In that sense, the novel does allow more nuanced representations of disability, but the efficiency of this potential may be challenged by the fact that it can only be accessed through a more actively critical reading. Consequently, any understanding of Auggie's characterization as a challenge to ableist norms relies on the reader's active engagement with and reflection on that same characterization, which disability rhetoric scholar Jay Dolmage explains is what makes disabled representations such significant carriers of meaning.

Di/Visibility

Dolmage argues that "all rhetoric is embodied" and that, even more importantly, "extraordinary bodies should be *the* bodies of rhetoric" (*Mêtis* 5-6) because they constantly push against the generally accepted boundaries of both bodies *and* rhetoric and can help re-shape both. Dolmage theorized the concept of *mêtis* as a form of embodied intelligence present especially in bodies that are marked by physical difference and is defined as "the craft of forging something practical out of [the positive and generative] possibilities [of disability]" (*Disability Rhetoric* 149). It focuses on the generative power of disability itself and therefore shifts the dynamic between *seer* and *seen*. Individuals with disabilities are able to reclaim their agency narratively and rhetorically by stepping out of the objectification of the gaze, which Auggie attempts to demonstrate in a limited, fraught way in his encounters with other characters. In fact, although the narrative claims to resist Auggie's objectification by allowing him to narrate his own story, he is still very much the object of the readers' (narrative) gaze.

Furthermore, those encounters that have the potential to shift the power of the gaze are often initiated by the physical and rhetorical act of looking, as exemplified by the multiple occasions when Auggie describes being stared at, which may paradoxically limit an argument about challenging starer/stare power dynamics. In her analysis of the social and rhetorical act of staring, Garland-Thomson argues that it is essentially an inquisitive act to make sense of an unexpected sight: "Seeing startingly stareable people challenges our assumptions by interrupting complacent visual business-as-usual. Staring offers an occasion to rethink the status quo" (*Staring* 6). In *Wonder,* Auggie's presence introduces this element of unexpectedness into the physical and social spaces he inhabits. In fact, he describes his first encounters with several characters on these very terms; when meeting one of his classmates, for example, he states: "I noticed Julian staring at me out of the corner of his eye. This is something I see people do a lot with me. They think I don't know they're staring, but I can tell from the way their heads are tilted" (Palacio 9).

However, although this occasion for the other characters to "rethink the status quo" brought about by Auggie's appearance can be generative in the sense that it allows starers to question their assumptions, it does place the burden of providing (or embodying) this opportunity onto the disabled individual. Additionally, it also reinscribes the disabled person's lack of self-agency and his or her use as a mere educational prop for other (normate) people – or their narrative prostheticizing. In that sense, Garland-Thomson's argument does emphasize the need to subvert *perceptions* of disability but offers no way to do so without using a disability signaled by visible markers (whether physical or behavioral, for instance) as a prompt or a pretext. This difficulty seems to be confirmed by *Wonder,* which paradoxically attempts to dismantle harmful stereotypes about disability while relying on those same stereotypes to characterize its protagonist.

Combining Dolmage's and Garland-Thomson's theoretical concepts illuminates the meaning-making potential of *looking* as a rhetorical act. In another instance, Palacio allows her readers to be both voyeuristic "starers" and active participants in meaning-making through the use of the multiple narrators. By shifting perspectives between characters who orbit around Auggie – his sister, two of his friends, and two of his sister's friends – Palacio interweaves their subjectivities like fragments of a larger picture. On the one hand, each narrator's thoughts are disconnected in that they do not respond to one another and, apart from Auggie, they do not address the reader directly. On the other hand, the readers do have access to each narrator's thoughts, and what one character sees or knows builds on information that a previous narrator provided. On Halloween, for instance, Auggie goes to school in full costume and stumbles across a conversation between his friend Jack Will and another boy (and August's bully), Julian. Unaware of Auggie's presence, Julian makes fun of Auggie and is joined by Jack, which upsets Auggie so much he goes home sick. In a later section narrated by Jack, the reader learns about the same event from his point of view; indeed, the young boy explains:

> I was so mean. I don't even know why. I'm not even sure what I said, but it was bad. It was only a minute or two. It's just that I knew Julian and everybody thought I was so weird for hanging out with August all the time, and I felt stupid. And I don't know why I said that stuff. I just was going along. I was stupid. (Palacio 47)

Allowing the readers access to both perspectives enables them to understand more complex implications of the interaction than a one-sided narration might. The readers may feel sorry that Jack yielded to peer pressure, or they may be angry that he did not stand up for his friend – in any case, the ability to make that decision comes down to a subjective understanding of the situation and its moral implications. Just like Auggie does in a later section of the story, the readers have the ability to decide whether to forget Jack's actions or to hold him accountable for them. Palacio therefore complicates the conversation about disability representation by creating opportunities for readers to reflect about their personal agency in the construction and reception of those representations. In another example, Auggie's statement that "whatever [the readers are] thinking, [his appearance is] probably worse" (1) further exemplifies the readers' agency in deciding where to draw the line between the accepted norm and what is beyond it, or "worse."

Consequently, the rhetorical means by which Palacio makes August visible and invisible position him in an ambiguous state of what I would define as "di/visibility." The term "di/visibility" combines the productive potential of both disability itself and its reception by invoking simultaneously multiple strands of connected ideas: visibility and invisibility, ability and disability, and the duality implied by each binary – as it relates to different audiences: the child and adult readers of children's literature, or the abled and disabled audiences who receive this narrative. Although each of those binary oppositions resist any essential categorization, their mere presence, as artificial and limiting as it may be, does reveal the ideological implications that underlie social hierarchies between abled and disabled subjectivities.

August's Physicality

An analysis of the rare visual elements in *Wonder* can help illuminate those connections: the cover design and decorative illustrations at the beginning of each section (eight in total) are the only visual components that Palacio’s novel contains. However, despite this limited pictorial information, the narrative is packed with references to the visual – and more specifically, to visual information that is accessible to the characters and merely suggested to the reader. However, this indirect visuality does participate in visual rhetoric, if only because of the author’s deliberate choice to *exclude* some parts of the expected visual information, and elements of visual rhetoric are in fact used in this mostly non-visual text, narrated through the characters and by extension to the implied reader.

The first description of Auggie the readers get is narrated by his sister, Via, who goes through every detail of his face in an almost clinical way in one long paragraph:

> His eyes are about an inch below where they should be on his face, almost halfway down his cheeks. They slant downward at an extreme angle, almost like diagonal slits that someone cut into his face, and the left one is noticeably lower than the right one. They bulge outward because his eye cavities are too shallow to accommodate them. The top eyelids are always halfway closed, like he’s on the verge of sleeping. The lower eyelids sag so much they almost look like a piece of invisible string is pulling them downward: you can see the red part on the inside, like they’re almost inside out. He doesn’t have eyebrows or eyelashes. His nose is disproportionately big for his face, and kind of fleshy. His head is pinched in on the sides where the ears should be, like someone used pliers and crushed the middle part of his face. He doesn’t have cheekbones. There are deep creases running down both sides of his nose to his mouth, which gives him a waxy appearance. Sometimes people assume he’s been burned in a fire: his features look like they’ve been melted, like the drippings on the side of a candle. Several surgeries to correct his lip have left a few scars around his mouth, the most noticeable one being a jagged gash running

> from the middle of his upper lip to his nose. His upper teeth are small and splay out. He has a severe overbite and an extremely undersized jawbone. He has a very small chin. When he was very little, before a piece of his hip bone was surgically implanted into his lower jaw, he really had no chin at all. (Palacio 28)

Tellingly, the chapter's title is "August Through the Peephole," which alludes to Via trying to see August from an outsider's point of view. The term "peephole" additionally speaks to the fact that (narratively) staring at August's face takes on a somewhat voyeuristic dimension both for the other characters and for the readers. Through this passage, the readers are finally given what they had been denied so far by Auggie: a clear "view" of his face, in painstaking detail to satisfy their curiosity, through another character's eyes. This descriptive passage adds to the image already constructed in the readers' minds by the information previously available to them, namely Auggie's claim that "whatever [they are] thinking, it's probably worse" (1) and his depiction of shocked reactions from strangers. Additionally, because Via is not disabled, the readers now have the opportunity to see August through the perspective of normate privilege, a subjectivity that the text seems to assume they may find easier to align with. The peephole that enables Via to see her brother through a stranger's perspective also allows the readers to stare at him while somewhat alleviating the pretense of politeness that usually regulates the act of staring in social situations. In that sense, the act of staring is performed one-sidedly by an active, (assumed) abled reader towards a passive disabled subject. Via's section therefore offers a different view on disability (and perhaps a narrative respite if her normate position is indeed more familiar to the reader), that of the loving but often neglected sibling of a disabled child.

The novel's cover design further exemplifies the narrative tension between seeing and hiding parts of Auggie's physicality. It shows the outline of Auggie's face with no visible feature beside an eye (which also emphasizes the significance of *seeing* in this story). Graphic esigner Referring to Tad Carpenter's illustration, Chip Kidd explicitly states that "the challenge was to depict Auggie's face on the cover in a way that wasn't literal, which might put readers off. This illustration [suggests] a face without actually showing any details" (107). This symbolic representation is therefore identifiable, but vague enough to once again engage the viewer's imagination. The partial face suggests the monstrous qualities also evoked by Palacio's writing: the implied reader is meant to imagine Auggie's actual face, as indicated by Kidd's comment that a more realistic representation might "put readers off" (107). In addition, this design seems to normalize the few features it does show; according to the text, Auggie does not have ears, and his eyes are supposed to be lower and slanted downwards. The cover also clearly positions Auggie's condition as a *lack* – because the face lacks recognizable elements, then by extension his disability is seen as a lack of normate features.

At the beginning of each new section, the shift between points of view is shown with a small character illustration to introduce the new narrator. Via, Summer, Jack, Justin and Miranda's faces in turn repeat the design set by Auggie's representation on the cover – simple outlines, only a few facial features shown (an eye, glasses, or different hairstyles) – but the three section illustrations of August are particularly revealing; the first one depicts only the outline of his head without any facial features, the second one adds an eye and his hearing aid, and the third one finally shows him wearing an astronaut helmet (a recurring symbol throughout the story). Auggie's visual progression from barely visible to more fully embodied is depicted through a process of figurative and literal prosthesizing. Mitchell and Snyder point out that "narrative prosthesis situates the experience and representational life of disability upon the ironic grounding of an unsteady rhetorical stance. In a literal sense a prosthesis seeks to accomplish an illusion [of normalcy, or able-bodiedness]. Yet the prosthesizing of a body or a rhetorical figure carries with it ideological assumptions about what is aberrant [i.e. what needs to be fixed, or compensated for]" (Mitchell and Snyder 6). In other words, Auggie's emotional journey towards increasing visibility is characterized by his decreasing physicality in the images that depict him, more and more concealed by artificial devices. The medical and narrative prostheses of the hearing aid and helmet do afford him visibility, but a visibility that mitigates the abnormality of his embodiment. This raises the question of whether he is finally *visible*, or successfully *hidden* – an issue which echoes the ambiguity of his characterization. Indeed, Auggie's ambivalent visibility in the text's images is closely connected to the ambiguous contextualization of his facial difference: it is referred to as a medical condition, but the medical aspects of Auggie's appearance are not central to the story; it is never described as an impairment, although Auggie does end up needing hearing aids; and it is not defined as a disability, but is certainly treated as one, as the next section will demonstrate.

Condition, Impairment, or Disability?

Although Auggie himself never describes his condition as a disability, most reviews and scholarship written about *Wonder* do consider that his character participates in disability representation in mainstream media. In order for us to work under the same assumption, I should therefore explain why he does indeed seem to fall under the interactional model of disability defined by Tom Shakespeare. Developed in the 1970s, the prevalence of the social model in disability scholarship has revealed the significance of the "social, economic, political, cultural, relational and psychological barriers" (Goodley 11) that contribute to the construction of disability as a socio-cultural phenomenon, while distinguishing these disabling factors from impairment itself. However, Shakespeare highlights more complex interactions between the social model and the more traditional medical model of disability. By questioning both the latter's emphasis on an individual model where the responsibility of normalization is placed upon the disabled person and the social model's reluctance to take into account the biophysical aspect of disability, this interactional model instead describes the disability experience as a constant interaction between personal embodiment and social construction. Shakespeare states that "disability is [relational; it is] a relationship between intrinsic factors (impairments, personality, motivation, etc.) and extrinsic factors (environments, support systems, oppression, etc.)" (76). Moreover, he bases his analysis of disability on critical realist theory, which "offers a non-reductionist perspective, in which neither culture, nor economics nor biology dominates" (74) but are instead interconnected elements that produce disability as a phenomenon. In *Wonder*, for example, it is precisely the conflation of Auggie's physical appearance and his impeded socialization that illustrate this interactional model of disability.

Rather than framing Auggie's physical condition as an impairment in and of itself, Palacio instead highlights the social norms, practices and interactions that are imbued with disabling rhetoric. Auggie's condition does include a medical aspect as well: he mentions having had twenty-seven surgeries that have prevented him from attending school, and in the second half of the novel he is fitted with a hearing device that enables him to, as he puts it, "hear brightly" (Palacio 66). Consequently, most reviews and scholarship establish a direct link between Auggie's position as a social outsider and his appearance. However, little to no mention is made of his medical issues in those same reviews and articles, and although this seems to confirm the social aspect of Auggie dis-ablement[4], the physical and psychological dimensions of living with a craniofacial disorder are not explored in depth in the novel – a fact that some reviewers have pointed out may constitute a significant gap in Palacio's representation of Auggie. In a *Washington Post* article that compiles responses to the film from children with craniofacial conditions, the mother of one of the interviewed children states that "the movie "hit the nail on the head" with its anti-bullying theme, but did not otherwise represent parenting a child with Treacher-Collins. "It covers a very small section of what a family goes through," she said. "It only covers some of the social, it doesn't cover the medical, the scheduling your daily life around appointments" (Klein pars. 13-14). In other words, Palacio's insistence on describing Auggie as an extraordinary child while glossing over more realistic aspects of his lived experience reiterates his purely symbolic and narrative purpose.

In short, what the novel actually does is perhaps best explained by the redemptive attempt that underlies it. *Wonder* seems to conflate an explicit educational goal with a stereotypical representation of a disabled character designed as a catalyst for an abled audience's sensitivities, a rhetorical gap which may indirectly reinforce the very misconceptions Palacio attempts to dismantle. Additionally, and perhaps because of the affordances and constraints particular to each genre, some of these more problematic aspects are highlighted in the novel's subsequent film and picturebook adaptations which I examine in the next section.

---

[4] The subsequent movie adaptation almost completely erases the medical aspect of Auggie's condition and does not include his hearing aid, which may hint at a desire to use disability to propel the narrative rather than to represent a lived experience of disability.

Film and Picturebook: How Visual Texts Expand on Auggie's Di/Visibility

The film adaptation of *Wonder* that came out in 2017 expands on Auggie's visuality quite a bit, if only because of the chosen medium. Casting and showing the young protagonist on screen required ways to either get around the subject of Auggie's in/visibility or to emphasize it through other means – with different outcomes and implications. Indeed, Auggie's condition carries different meanings when it is represented mainly through visual media rather than entirely textually: his physical characterization, the way his appearance is used as a narrative tool, and the messages conveyed about physical difference necessarily differ from his embodiment in a novel.

In the film, Auggie is played by Jacob Tremblay, a young actor who wears prosthetics to resemble a version of Treacher-Collins syndrome. The fact that an abled actor was chosen over an actor with a facial difference has given rise to significant criticism in the disabled, and more precisely the craniofacial, community. Writer and disability activist Ariel Henley published extensive reviews of *Wonder* and its treatment of facial difference on her own website, in *Teen Vogue*, and in *The Atlantic*. She points out the underlying ableism that led to the casting of Auggie, and how detrimental that choice can be to the apparent message of the story:

> As someone who grew up with Crouzon syndrome …, it was devastating to realize that the directors involved with *Wonder* would rather cast a healthy, "normal" looking child and put him in makeup and prosthetics, rather than cast someone who looked like me. … Our stories matter and our experiences matter, and to portray our lives and struggles as nothing more than a source of inspiration encouraging those without craniofacial disorders to feel better about themselves, is a great disservice to everyone in the cranio community. … This is not to say that *Wonder* hasn't or won't continue to accomplish what it set out to do, and

> that's raise awareness to craniofacial disorders. But to suggest that [people] with craniofacial disorders, who so desperately want to see themselves reflected in mainstream media, should be grateful for this movie, while ignoring all the ways in which this story and the casting is problematic, only perpetuates our marginalization (*Teen Vogue* pars. 3-11).

Henley also criticizes the appearance of the protagonist in the film, arguing that it does not reflect the lived experience described in the novel (regardless of its own original problems):

> The adaptation also skews reality—and, in this case, the source material—by making Auggie's appearance far less extreme. In the novel, Palacio gave page-long descriptions of the boy's face, detailing the at-times-gruesome truth about living with a craniofacial condition. "Sometimes people assume he's been burned in a fire: His features look like they've been melted, like the drippings on the side of a candle," Palacio writes. Auggie's eyes, readers are told, are halfway down his face and sag and slant downwards. He doesn't have eyebrows, eyelashes, or cheekbones. (If you look up images of Tremblay's Auggie and images of children with Treacher Collins, you can see how stark the difference is.)
>
> The film's producers likely had their reasons for giving Auggie only a slight disfigurement, maybe to avoid being seen as exploiting his looks or to make the movie as broadly appealing as possible. But it's one thing to read about severe disfigurement and the social trauma that can accompany it in a book, and another entirely to see it play out on screen, where viewers might be forced more viscerally to confront their own prejudices. The adaptation, instead, goes a gentler route: The prosthetics that Tremblay wears make Auggie difficult to look at, but not too difficult, allowing viewers to be more receptive to

> the film’s message of accepting those who look different—though not too different. (*The Atlantic* pars. 7-8)

Furthermore, both in positive and negative reviews alike, the film was repeatedly described as “emotionally manipulative” (Bradshaw par. 1; Wasser par. 3) and likened to a Hallmark movie, which, combined with the protagonist’s mitigated appearance, suggests that the implied viewer is constructed as a specific entity. Indeed, reviewers of both the novel and the movie have questioned who the story is intended for: its explicit educational message seems to be directed at an audience who is unfamiliar with physical difference in general and with craniofacial difference in particular – Auggie’s role seems to be to lead abled children to “accept” children who don’t look like them. Empathy in Wonder has a one-directional definition: it is the normate children who direct it towards “different” children, dismissing the agency of the latter. Allison Klein’s *Washington Post* article suggests that young viewers with craniofacial conditions are indeed aware of this narrative centering:

> Families of kids with facial differences have embraced the credo of acceptance and kindness in the book. Yet despite those lessons, the story is not entirely relatable for some children who have Auggie’s [assumed] condition, Treacher Collins syndrome.
>
> “I didn’t like that Auggie was ashamed of his face,” said Teresa Joy Dyson, 10. “I have Treacher Collins syndrome and I’m kind of proud of my face. I’m not afraid to look at people and show who I am.”
>
> Teresa Joy has attended a public school in San Jose, since she was in kindergarten, and has many friends there. She is not bullied, as Auggie is in the book.

> She and many other kids with facial deformities, and their families, are nonetheless fans of the book and the movie adaptation. It's just that the message of the film is not for them, they say. It's for everybody else (pars. 4-7).

Incidentally, young Teresa Joy also points out a common bias in representing physical difference, which is that individuals outside the norm are unhappy with their appearance *by default*, most likely an assumption made by abled people perhaps projecting their own discomfort when confronted with disability and ultimately promoting ableist normalization. This dynamic echoes Auggie's role in *Wonder* as a catalyst for the characters (and perhaps to some extent the readers) who project their own insecurities onto him. In fact, the very existence of this novel is indeed predicated upon that same assumption: Auggie has been excluded from social environments his whole life because of his medical needs and the main concern he faces when he starts school for the first time is whether other children will accept or reject him based on his physical appearance (other factors such as his intelligence or his sense of humor seem secondary, if not tangential to the creation of friendships).

The novel seems to emphasize the education of abled readers by modeling interactions with a "different" character over providing disabled readers with a character who might echo, and therefore validate, some of their own lived experience. The resulting effect may therefore differ from the author's intended objective and align more closely with the original anecdote that inspired it, namely redressing a situation as experienced from the perspective of an abled/normate individual. In her review of *Wonder*, Elizabeth A. Wheeler addresses why this point of view can be detrimental to disabled readers who may look to literature to find similarly disabled representations that they may lack in real life. She highlights a seeming paradox of "applying disability studies to children's literature. [While] disability studies emphasizes the public profile of disability as a shared culture, a community, and a political movement …, most children don't grow up around others who share their disability" (335). In other words, Palacio's novel explicitly attempts to redress this situation by exposing a large readership to a protagonist with a physical difference, but Wheeler points out that merely including disabled characters viewed from an abled gaze, although an improvement in the *quantity* of disabled representation available to disabled children, may actually reinforce their potential isolation when authors like Palacio focus on the behaviors of normate children towards Auggie more than the nuance and complexity of disabled experiences.

Palacio also wrote and illustrated a picturebook, *We're All Wonders*, loosely based on Auggie's story – although he is still the central character, the narrative is a simpler, seemingly empowering text rather than a developed plot – which further illustrates this ambiguity in the targeted audience. The style of the pictures in *We're All Wonders* echoes the novel's cover and chapter illustrations, with Auggie's face partially represented, showing only his hair, ears, and one of his eyes. However, the reliance on this depiction to now *convey* rather than merely support the narrative significantly impacts its original implications. Where in the novel, this visual representation of Auggie acted as a suggestion for the reader to fill in the blanks, so to speak, in the picturebook it becomes an active part of the narrative and therefore both carries and creates meaning; the relationship between his verbal and visual aspects seems almost inverted. The text that supports the illustrations in the picturebook – Auggie's first-person inner monologue – does not *create* Auggie to the same extent that it did in the novel. Conversely, here Auggie mainly exists as his visual depiction, which turns his incompleteness into an essential characteristic rather than a narrative symbol. Because picturebooks rely on pictorial information in a way that novels do not, using the same visual representation of Auggie in both genres has different implications.

The picturebook starts with a similar premise and even echoes the novel's introductory sentences: "I know I'm not an ordinary kid. Sure, I do ordinary things. I ride a bike. I eat ice cream. I play ball. I just don't look ordinary" (*We're All Wonders* 1-5). Readers are introduced to the character of Auggie, drawn on full-page illustrations as a young boy whose facial features are omitted, apart from one of his eyes. Later, under the text "I don't look like other kids," ten other children are drawn in small frames labelled with their names, and all of their facial features are visible – suggesting that they embody the norm that Auggie feels distanced from (6). The children reappear a few times throughout the text, and even when Auggie is shown to be interacting with them directly, he is the only one whose face is incomplete. Auggie is thereby placed on a different, symbolic level to the realistic (albeit cartoonish) drawings of the other children. His metaphorical ostracism continues when he is depicted as escaping his negative emotions by putting on his astronaut helmet and journeying into space, where he meets a crowd of friendly aliens which he greets as "old friends" (20). The aliens look nothing like humans, but they do share one characteristic with Auggie himself: only one blue eye, identical to his, is drawn on their otherwise empty faces. Although this is likely intended to create an emotional connection for Auggie, the ideological implications of this depiction are particularly revealing about the perception of disability in this fictional world. Here, the only beings that Auggie relates to are, quite literally, alien. Although it can arguably be read as a symbol of his emotional isolation, it does suggest that physical difference does not simply exclude him from accepted norms or social connections, but instead removes him from personhood altogether. In an attempt to redress this somewhat clumsy association, Auggie eventually gazes at the Earth and marvels at the "billions of people. People of all different colors. People who walk and talk differently. People who look different" (21) and goes back home, where he is befriended by a boy who learns to "change the way [he sees]" (25). The authorial voice is heavily didactic throughout the book, which ends with a clear moral lesson: "Look with kindness and you will always find wonder" (29).

This moral echoes the motto of the "Choose Kind" movement, a campaign launched after *Wonder*'s success to promote kindness among elementary and middle school students. On her website, Palacio explains that "since its publication, *Wonder* has been embraced by teachers and students, incorporated into curriculum plans, and selected for countless school-wide and community reads across the country. It [has been used as] a vehicle for discussions about kindness, bullying, responsibility, overcoming challenges, and friendship" ("Choose Kind" par. 2). The *#ChooseKind* hashtag, for example, compiles some of the school and community projects initiated by the campaign's participants, such as becoming a "Certified Kind" classroom or holding drawing contests around the theme of inclusion.

The campaign, although generally successful and well received, has also been criticized for further othering children with craniofacial conditions by relying on the previously mentioned rhetoric model of disability of the "wondrous" – i.e. depicting children with those conditions as heroes or inspirations. Henley points out the problems with commercializing facial difference that underlies one community project in particular:

> Campaigning to send "Real-Life Auggies" or "real life children with disfigurements/craniofacial differences" to schools across the country defeats everything this book is supposed to stand for. Instead of promoting inclusion, it further objectifies

> people living with these conditions, and portrays them as “other.” It presents individuals with disfigurements not as equals, but as someone to be pitied. It’s commercialized inspiration porn, at best. Not to mention, a “real-life Auggie” sounds like an exotic animal you’d see displayed somewhere, not a child living with a medical condition. This kind of language has real consequences for real people. (“Commercializing” par. 7)

Through the commercialization of children with craniofacial conditions, their “stareability” becomes commodified in a way that echoes Garland-Thomson’s assertion that “seeing startingly stareable people challenges our assumptions by interrupting complacent visual business-as-usual” (*Staring* 6). In this case, however, it is debatable whether staring truly “offers an occasion to rethink the status quo” (6) or if it is performed as a one-sided action that divides children into active onlookers and passive subjects. The “real-life Auggies” are put on display under an ableist gaze that is heightened rather than questioned, which seems to go against the movement’s explicit goal.

The film adaptation, the *We’re All Wonders* picturebook, and the “Choose Kind” campaign all expand on Palacio’s attempt to make Auggie’s condition more visible in social discourse, but each text brings its own set of complications regarding the treatment of his visuality. Auggie is di/visible in different ways in each instance: he is represented visually but his appearance is mitigated in the film; his physicality is paradoxically absent from the picturebook but disability is likened to an alien race; and craniofacial conditions have been commercialized to benefit a larger, abled audience in the wake of *Wonder*’s publication. Taken together, those texts hold the potential for productive encounters between readers/viewers and texts, but they also reinscribe harmful ideologies by reproducing categorical representations of the abled/disabled binary. Although Auggie is presented as the agent of his own narrative, he is in reality confined to a narrative role that serves other children's interests. By extension, readers with craniofacial conditions are bypassed in favor of an implied reader that is assumed to be able-bodied – this isn't necessarily a story *about* August Pullman, or even *for* August Pullman or children like him, but a pretext to engage the majority, normate children. Reviewer Deborah Stevenson points out that *Wonder* is a

> perceptive study of the way societal difference sends ripples through a group [and offers] some insight into [the power of the group and] what enables some classmates to withstand the pressure to reject Auggie. The changing dynamics are particularly shrewdly observed, as followers tire of one-note extremists, and an attack by outsiders (Auggie is bullied on a multi-school outing) elicits group solidarity in a way that thoughtfulness never could. (366)

In that sense, *Wonder* is an ambiguous text: while the narrative models behaviors for abled or normate children to adopt when interacting with disabled peers, this educational endeavor has both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, it offers potential for empathetic reading, but on the other hand, this limits the scope of its action by reinscribing of a hierarchy of privilege between abled and disabled children. This conflicting stance seems to undermine the narrative's explicit objective, at least to the extent that it denounces and reproduces those same hierarchies simultaneously, and thus makes *Wonder* an ambivalent representation of disability in children's literature.

What does appear significant, though, is that the form of the novel itself, especially when compared to the film or to the picturebook, can allow the narrative to address disability in a somewhat more complex way. The absence of a direct visual depiction may enable more nuanced representations of a character's subjectivity (provided this visual lack is not used merely as a marker of otherness). The multiple narration offers insight into the perception of disability not only *as a disabled person* but as someone with a different experience of it – a relative, a friend, or a teacher, for example. *Wonder* indeed begins to address some of these questions through its emphasis on the relationship between the form and the content of the narrative, and although it presents a relatively problematic rhetoric of disability, this middle grade novel points out some specific strategies to represent disability more accurately and more empoweringly in children's literature – strategies that need to be further examined and employed more critically.

CHAPTER II: NARRATIVE POSITIONING AND DISABILITY CONSTRUCTION IN CECE BELL'S *EL DEAFO*

The complex interactions between personal memory and narrative construction is an issue best exemplified by autobiographical genres, and further complicated by visual representations of the narrated subject. Cece Bell's graphic memoir *El Deafo,* published in 2014 and recipient of the Newbery Honor award, exemplifies this complex relationship. *El Deafo* is a fictionalized account of Bell's childhood through kindergarten and elementary school as she learns to navigate the hearing loss she experienced due to contracting meningitis at age four, a defining moment that is introduced in the first few pages of the visual memoir. Young Cece Bell, who like the other characters is represented as an anthropomorphized rabbit in a brightly colored style reminiscent of American superhero comics, learns to form relationships with her classmates, teachers, and neighbors with the help of her imaginary alter ego, El Deafo, who embodies the confidence and assertiveness that Cece[5] herself lacks.

In contrast to Palacio's *Wonder,* which used a fictional character to represent a partly more generic disability, Bell's reliance on her personal memories allows her to contextualize the way other characters' reactions or stereotyping reflect some common conceptions of deafness in society at large. Although lived experience of disability may not be the only way to legitimize an author's take on the subject, Bell's fluid narrative positioning seems to contrast with Palacio's in that she allowed for different perspective to be expressed and represented in her graphic novel, while Palacio's more unilateral gaze does not seem to offer the same possibility for more flexible understandings of disabled subjectivities.

---

[5] For clarity, adult Cece Bell (whether author or narrator, depending on context) will be referred to as "Bell," and young Cece Bell (the protagonist) will be referred to as "Cece."

Sara Kersten-Parrish's studies conducted on fifth-grade and undergraduate students' analyses of *El Deafo* map out how (hearing) readers conceptualize deafness through the specific affordances of graphic novels (Kersten; Kersten-Parrish). In asking her students the question "Should the author Cece Bell have used the comics form to tell her story about losing her hearing?", Kersten found that "the dual nature of the comics form and the written dialogue creates a unique experience in not only reading about deafness but also seeing how Cece's deafness affected herself, her environment, and the dynamic between Cece and her friends and family" (Kersten 43), which leads readers to be "introduced [to] different points of view as they questioned the positioning of characters and their own able-bodiedness" (46).

In fact, the relationship between visual and verbal information highlights complex interactions between Bell's adult narrating voice and her younger character's voice, and Bell's educational tone emphasizes tensions with the implied readers as well. By constructing and addressing a specific audience in her story, Bell draws attention to the affordances and constraints of the medium she chose. As Smith-D'Arezzo and Holc explain, "graphic novels are well positioned to challenge traditional models of the representation of disability because of their unique blend of visual and textual techniques, as well as their reliance on abstraction (McCloud 1994)" (Smith D'Arezzo and Holc 74). Therefore, drawing on the autobiographical aspect of her graphic novel enables Bell to establish narrative legitimacy and to position the reader as a witness to her testimony. Additionally, the narrative is also layered with text and visuals that play off of each other to make this narrative of her life – and specifically her deafness – a particularly revealing example of narrative positioning regarding disability[6] in children's literature.

---

[6] Although Bell states that she "[does not] think of [herself] as someone with a disability" (236), she explains that *El Deafo* "is in no way a representation of what all deaf people might experience. [Other deaf people]

The Levels of Narration in Autographics

In addition to being the narrator of the story, Bell is also the main character; it is therefore important to untangle her narrating and narrated identities in order to understand the interactions between those narrative levels in *El Deafo*. Indeed, Cece is meant to represent Bell's younger self, but she cannot be completely equated to either the author (real or implied) or the narrator. Beyond the immediately obvious visual difference that young Cece is depicted as an anthropomorphized rabbit, young Cece is also discursively distanced from Bell through narrative time, and she is mediated by the author for the purposes of the narrative. Her story, for instance, follows the conventions of traditional narratives: she is first introduced as the main character, then conflict arises (Cece loses her hearing, making it difficult for her to make friends later) which causes her to struggle for a resolution before she finds a happy ending (her new best friend, Martha, earns her place as the sidekick to Cece's superhero alter ego). Cece is both a part of Bell's remembered experience, and a fictional product.

Therefore, as in many personal narratives, the line between fiction and reality is blurred, and the very nature of the graphic novel form enhances this ambiguity of meaning. Indeed, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson list four "features of autographics [that] distinguish it from other media of self-representation" (Smith and Watson 169):

---

might think of their deafness as a difference, and they might, either secretly or openly, think of it as a disability, too" (235-236). At no point in the story does Cece call herself, or is she called by another character, "disabled"; at the same time, she is excluded from or unable to participate in certain social activities specifically because of her hearing impairment, which adheres to the interactional model of disability theorized by Tom Shakespeare. In that sense, I am arguing that *El Deafo* participates in mainstream disability representation, and can also offer a wider definition of disability that allows for self-definition.

1) The hybridity of graphic memoirs, which allows the verbal and visual planes to coexist while remaining distinct narratives, "thus engaging contesting stories and interpretations of autobiographical memory and meaning,"
2) The "overlapping layers of self-presentation" present in graphic novels, namely "the hand or aesthetic autograph of the author/artist that draws; the autobiographical avatar, an "I" both imaged and voiced; the dialogue bubbles of the characters, including the narrated "I"; and the addressees within the comic and beyond,"
3) The comic genre itself, where frames and gutters create narrative gaps that need to be filled by the reader's imagination to create a unified narrative, thereby requiring a direct form of collaboration between reader and text,
4) And finally, "the distinctive character of graphic style, at once an effect of amplification and simplification," which enables specific meaning-making by combining "codes from juvenilia into autobiographical narratives of history and trauma." (Whitlock 198, qtd. in Smith and Watson 169)

Those four characteristics are all exemplified by *El Deafo*, where the adult and child narratives intersect through the overlapping verbal and visual information, and they work together to build a complex network of meanings as often as they create narrative friction. *El Deafo* is, first of all, a hybrid text where the "verbal and visual planes" intersect to represent Bell's "overlapping layers of self-representation," namely her authorial voice, her (verbal) narrating self, and her (verbal and visual) narrated self. Through her story, she addresses implied readers whose understanding of the conventions of graphic novels enable them to witness the relationship between young Cece and adult Bell, a relationship which occurs both in the real world and on the page. This dialogue between Bell's narrative embodiments is rendered possible by allowances and constraints specific to the graphic novel, such as the interactions between two types of textual information (the narrator's text boxes and the characters' speech bubbles) or the intersection between the reader's gaze and the third-person representation in the illustrations. The readers, thus, have an active role in constructing the narrative that unfolds for them, first by working through the conventions of this graphic genre, then by allowing interpretations to emerge through the conflation of the various perspectives offered to them.

The distinction between those perceptions is indeed blurred: Bell's autodiegetic narration, for instance, is often ambiguous, as we will see in the following analysis. Although the different narrative roles she embodies may overlap to a certain extent, they are also to be distinguished from one another in their relation to the narrative and to each other. There are two voices at play in the story from the start, namely that of the adult narrator and that of young Cece. Significantly, apart from the very first page, the narrator's interventions (indicated in yellow frames at the top of the panels) are in the first person and in the present tense, implying that they (attempt to) express Cece's thoughts at the time of the events depicted in the illustrations. Maria Nikolajeva distinguishes between "who speaks (the narrator), who sees (the focalizing character, focalizer), and who is seen (the focalized character, focalizee)" ("Beyond" 11). In *El Deafo*, Bell narrates the story of her younger self, who is both the focalizer whose subjective point of view is depicted through the events of the story, and the focalizee represented in the third person illustrations.

On the first page of the novel, Bell's adult voice introduces the narrative with "I was a regular little kid" (Bell 1). On the following page, however, the narrative voice states: "But then everything changed" (in the first panel), followed by silent panels showing Cece getting sick, until the narrator's last comment: "My parents rush me to the hospital" (in the last panel). This shift from past to present tense suggests a slip in focalization too, but it is unclear whether the voice itself (*who* is speaking) also changes. In other words, the change in narrative tense suggests an attempt to blur the distance between the narrator and the focalizer/focalizee, perhaps in order to enhance the reader's empathy for the protagonist. This seems to align with Andrea Schwenke Wyile's concept of "engaging narration," which

> [attempts to] bring readers back to the feelings of the character-focalizer at that moment in time, rather than to provide them with an analysis of the narrator's current views on the situation. Here the word "engaging" is key. The narrator seeks to reconstruct the events being related in a way that engages readers, a way that invites them to consider themselves in, or close to, the position of the protagonist. (116)

Despite the dissonance introduced by a clear distinction between the narrating and narrated subjectivities at the very beginning of *El Deafo*, the subsequent attempt to close that gap, or at least to conceal its effects to produce narrative empathy, illustrates what Wyile terms "first-person immediate-engaging narration," a type of narration where

> narrator and character blend into one another in many readers' minds despite the fact that one can make a technical distinction between the "I" who narrates and the "I" who experienced the events—that is, between the narrator and the character. (120)

Although the adult voice framing the story is removed in time from the protagonist, the conflation between Bell's and Cece's voices throughout the majority of the narrative almost erases any visible sign that they are not, in fact, the same narrative agent. This illusion also suggests a continuity, rather than a sharp divide, between Bell's adult and child voices, thus providing more nuanced interactions between her different narrative embodiments than a clear-cut distinction would allow.

Throughout the rest of the story, the narration remains consistent – in the present tense, mimicking naïve, childish language – to suggest the story is told in Cece's own voice, but Maria Nikolajeva reminds readers to be wary of such assumptions: "Just as children in real life need adults in order to survive, it is part of the poetics of children's literature to use an adult narrative agency to provide young readers with at least some guidance" ("Beyond" 12). In other words, the narrator's voice is always inevitably Bell's, because although the narrator may adopt Cece's point of view and even her language, she necessarily retains Bell's adult consciousness and the narrative mediation that goes along with it. Introducing Bell's adult voice at the beginning and failing to signal a clear transition reinforces this idea of a continuity between the adult narrator who seems to emulate child-like speech and the child focalizer. Some of the more didactic passages in the novel, where the narrator explains something to the reader that Cece, as the protagonist, already knows, illustrate this implicit adult presence. We can see an example of this when Cece, who is learning to lip-read, is depicted in several panels talking to different characters while holding signs explaining what they are doing wrong, such as one that says "Must see person's face at all times!" with her mother doing the dishes and facing away from Cece (*El Deafo* 39). The comments on those signs appear to mimic Cece's language, but could equally be read as the adult narrator's teaching voice.

The narrator's last intervention in the story provides a visible example of this continuity. The last few panels depict Cece and her friend Martha dressed as superheroes, posing with their arms around each other's shoulders and facing towards the reader, with Cece's bubble reading "El Deafo! And her *true friend* – you!" (Bell 233). This last sentence in the book may in fact be the best illustration of all the ambiguous narrative subjectivities at play in *El Deafo*. The narrator's last comment appears a few pages earlier and ends with ellipses, which do not express an unfinished thought but instead allow for Cece's younger subjectivity to take over the narration through speech bubbles alone during the last pages of the book, suggesting that the young girl has gained assertiveness and confidence. On the last page described above, Cece is now represented as her (super)heroic alter ego El Deafo and she invites her friend Martha to join her fantasy. In this instance, several narrative voices seem to be conflated: who exactly is speaking and who is the "you" being referred to here? On the one hand, it seems pretty clear that this is protagonist Cece's voice, but the scene can be read either as part of Cece's diegetic reality (i.e. Cece and Martha are playing together), as Cece's diegetic fantasy (i.e. Cece's alter ego now has an imaginary sidekick), or as an extradiegetic reality that now includes the reader. So the voice that utters that last sentence seems to be a conflation of Cece's voice as a child character and the adult subjectivity of the narrator who appeals to the implied readers by addressing them directly. Even though they all ultimately belong to the same real author, these narrative identities generate narrative gaps that simultaneously combine and contrast meanings depending on, and allowing for, the reader's perception. In other words, the "you" that is referred to here may therefore be addressing the intradiegetic character of Martha, the young implied reader now directly involved in the narrative, an implicit older implied reader specific to children's narratives, or perhaps even to the real reader who is now about to close the book. These different but overlapping significations are made possible through the readers' meaning-making process, based on their own implicit understanding of narrativity in *El Deafo*. As a result, the novel seems to encourage the creation of an interpersonal relationship between the text and its readers that enables empathetic readings of Cece's story.

For example, in her discussion of the use anthropomorphism in graphic narratives, Suzanne Keen points out that "animal character types associated with genres and modes generate expectations of their own" ("Fast Tracks" 137), and thus "any anthropomorphized representation of an animal either tacitly accepts or works against cultural pre-sets" (138). Bell's use of anthropomorphic characters seems to fall under what Keen terms "strategic narrative empathy," or "[authors'] manipulation of target audiences through deliberate representational choices designed to sway the feelings of their readers (although actual readers' responses vary)" (136). Bell explains her choice to represent her characters as rabbits in an interview with the *School Library Journal*:

> Bunnies have giant ears and excellent hearing. My portrayal as the one rabbit whose giant ears did not work—that's kind of the way it felt. Exaggerated? Sure. But I wanted to convey the feeling of really standing out when I didn't want to stand out at all. I'm finding out now that the whole bunny-instead-of-human thing helps the book resonate with kids of all ethnicities, too. I love that. (Parrott par. 3)

In his analysis of deaf characters in comic books, Bill Beechler additionally points out that "by making the characters animals, the societal barriers which can keep the reader from identifying with them can be eliminated. Bell is already reaching out to readers through the main character with a disability most of them will not have experienced and, by using anthropomorphism, she makes that task a bit easier" (55). In addition to the significance of anthropomorphism in *El Deafo*, Beechler's analysis also highlights the intended readers' narrative positioning. If animal characters allow for greater empathy from the reader towards

Cece, or even deaf children more broadly, then something within the narrative itself must create, and perhaps demand, an empathetic reading of disability.

Narrative Empathy and Intimacy in *El Deafo*

Indeed, throughout her graphic memoir, Bell seems to develop what Sara K. Day terms “narrative intimacy,” or

> narrator-reader relationships that reflect, model and reimagine intimate interpersonal relationships through the disclosure of information and the experience of the story as a space that the narrator invites the reader to share. Generally speaking, narrative intimacy is established through constructions of the narrator and reader that reflect and emphasize the creation of an emotional bond based on trust and disclosure. (3-4)

In *El Deafo*, Bell’s open disclosure of her past experiences and struggles, both physical and emotional, creates that bond of trust with the (implied) reader. A relationship is established with a particular kind of reader, rather than with any possible reader, and a few instances throughout Bell’s story offer evident glimpses into that implied reader’s construction. Some of those examples play on the very form of the graphic novel, such as when an arrow-shape text box that reads “But wait! There’s more!” (31) instructs the reader to turn the page, inciting excitement, or at least curiosity, in the reader, and thus strengthening the sense of intimacy. In another instance, a label pointing towards Cece in her underwear humorously addresses the reader: “Avert your eyes!” (39). Both occurrences indicate that the narrating “I” is aware of its audience and, using graphic formatting codes to do so, directs them to take action and creates an emotional bond between narrator and reader based on shared humor. Additionally, the subject matter of the joke (i.e. Cece's underwear being on display) will likely appeal to an audience with a similar emotional maturity to the main character, thus constructing an implied reader of a similar age to Cece's, who is just starting first grade at that point in the narrative.

The seemingly adult narrator mimicking child-like language may also signal a continuity, rather than a complete rupture, between Bell's narrating and narrated subjectivities. This nuanced perception of Cece/Bell's narrative personas appear similar to Gubar's argument about the kinship model of childhood ("Hermeneutics"), as we will examine in more detail in the next section. A continuity rather than a rupture posits a construction of Bell's identity as a complete whole, albeit complex and fluid, rather than regimented by boundaries between separate aspects of her self-identity. Autobiographical texts like *El Deafo* underlain by this kinship model therefore highlight the deeper connections and resonances between the narrated and narrating selves, and can serve as an invitation for readers to examine their own connections and resonances with Cece/Bell. As a result, the implied reader becomes *necessary* to the completion of the story: without the reader's understanding of both Bell's timeline and the different voices she assumes throughout the book, those connections between the narrator and the protagonist are lost.

Furthermore, by depicting the protagonist at a young age, the text suggests a type of narrative empathy which predicates younger readers. This is reinforced by Bell's choice of media and the iconographic style she employs to tell her story, which are traditionally associated with children or adolescents: anthropomorphized animals, simple and brightly colored graphic style, intertextual references to comic books, etc. Her speech is also direct and linguistically uncomplicated, at least reminiscent of, if not identical to, children's language: "A doctor comes… and a nurse comes… and oh, but my head hurts. Really bad! The arm prickings and head measurings are endless!" (Bell 4-5). However, although the child-like language Bell employs seems to encourage empathy in a younger implied reader, she seems to simultaneously ask readers to learn from with her adult narrative voice.

By relating her experience of deafness through an educational tone, Bell imagines her implied readers as being unfamiliar with the topic at hand, suggesting that she imagines her readership to be hearing or able-bodied. By "educational tone," I am referring in particular to narrative passages where Bell temporarily abandons Cece's naïve perspective (on complicated medical issues, for example) for more detailed textual or visual explications that are necessarily filtered through her adult understanding. Although this shift takes place in the narrator's text boxes, it is also implied in Cece's speech, if only because the narrative is temporarily interrupted to give way to explicitly didactic passages. One such notable instance occurs when Cece is shown on a full-page panel wearing the Phonic Ear, her new hearing aid, for the first time (Bell 39). She is represented facing the reader directly, with labels that describe the different parts of the device in a diagram-like illustration. The image is extradiegetic because although most of the labels include humorous comments, such as "Earpiece, or 'earmold,' that I stick in my ear" or "Underpants! Avert your eyes!" (it is unclear whether they are meant to be Cece's own speech or Bell's child-like interventions, as the narrator's and protagonist's voices overlap in the novel's didactic passages), the image itself is not part of the narrative but rather acts more like an explanatory parenthesis. By definition, such occurrences are addressed directly at the reader, and more specifically at an implied reader imagined to be unfamiliar with this type of phonic device, either because they might be hearing or because the technology itself is dated.

On the subject of that reader's emotional maturity, Nodelman's concept of the "hidden adult" (*The Hidden Adult*) in children's literature highlights the impossibility for "true" children's literature, or literature made by, for and about children exclusively. In *El Deafo*, this paradox is illustrated by three core assumptions made by Bell about her readers that seem to underlie the construction of the implied reader in and by the narrative itself. The first one of these assumptions concerns the co-construction of the implied author and implied reader; indeed, by positioning the reader as a direct witness in a (one-sided) dialogue with the narrator, Bell creates a relationship that becomes integral to the text and essential for it to function. Because the narrative requires a reader whose position aligns with her adult self in looking back at young Cece, Bell constructs an implied reader to bear witness to her life narrative (and this implied reader is at least partly aligned with the real reader who purchases and consumes the book). This imaginary entity is sometimes addressed directly in the story, for instance when Bell's first-person narrator gives instructions to follow. When Cece learns to lip-read, she is depicted practicing her skills in the panels, but the narrator's voice in the text boxes provides explanations that are directed towards an extradiegetic reader rather than internal to the narrative.

One such example is a page showing three parallel rows of three panels. The first image in each row depicts Cece, dressed like Sherlock Holmes and facing the reader, with a text box that gives a definition of a type of clue that can help her figure out a word when lip-reading:

> Visual clues – What do you see when a person talks to you? / Context clues – Where are you while a person talks to you? What's going on around you during the conversation? / Gestural clues – What does a person do with her hands and body while she talks to you? What kinds of faces does she make? / But… sometimes what a person is *doing* doesn't match up with what it *looks like* they're *saying*. It's easy to make mistakes! (Bell 30-31)

Then, the next two panels in each row show Cece's teacher Dorn giving examples relating to each definition while gesturing helpfully and facing the reader as well – for visual clues, for example, Dorn holds up a pear and her speech bubbles says "a pear," then she shows a picture of a bear and her speech bubble says "a bear" (30).

In this passage, the text provided by the narrator directly echoes what Cece was taught at the time by her teacher: the "you" addressed by the narrator is both Cece during the narrated time, and the reader at the time of narration. In other words, although this passage is part of the story and contained within the narrative frame, it also works extradiegetically: the teacher's and the narrator's voices overlap, thereby simultaneously creating an intradiegetic scene and enabling the narrator to provide didactic commentary to the readers. Significantly, in the three panels where Cece is facing the reader, Cece's character voice and Bell's narrating voice are conflated, and both are aimed towards the readers. The way Cece is depicted on the page shows her learning lip-reading skills and simultaneously repeating this information to the reader – making her simultaneously *narrated* and *narrating*. In the panels where the teacher is facing the reader, however, the readers' gaze is temporarily aligned with Cece's. In both instances, the readers are placed as the learner in an educational situation, whether they are learning alongside Cece or later, when she repeats that information to them. The purpose of this educational passage, however, goes beyond simply teaching lip-reading techniques to the readers. By directly engaging readers in this learning process, the narrative invites them to take Cece's narrative position. This has the dual effect of encouraging an emotional understanding of Cece's communication process and can possibly offer readers real-life knowledge on interacting with deaf people – a goal which posits hearing readers.

The use of a visual genre seems to reinforce this construction of the implied reader as able-bodied more explicitly: to make her experience of hearing loss comprehensible and relatable to readers, Bell makes creative use of the graphic aspect of her novel. Empty speech bubbles, fading words in the dialogues, and phonetic transcription of confusing utterances translate Cece’s experience of hearing loss visually. For example, when Cece is examined by a doctor to assess her hearing, Bell transcribes the doctor’s words as: “Raay yoe hann wah ooo eer aah beep!” (16). The process of deciphering this utterance and experiencing some level of frustration in doing so enables the reader to experience Cece’s own confusion almost directly. Thereby, Bell replaces the deprivation of one sense (hearing) with another (sight/legibility) specifically for the benefit of the reader. This necessarily implies a reader who is unfamiliar enough with hearing loss to reach comprehension through a visual metaphor – a metaphor that may be partial and, perhaps to a certain extent, simplistic in its representation of deafness in that it equates a particular type of sensory loss with the symbolical impairment of another. However, such a metaphor is likely to be relatively accessible and therefore effective for most readers unfamiliar with sensory loss, as it necessarily posits hearing *and* sighted readers. As a result, *El Deafo* does seem to invite empathy towards Cece but, by gearing the narrative towards a specific audience of abled children, it also undermines to a certain extent the work that an empathetical reading could achieve in dismantling “abled vs. disabled” binary categorizations. On the other hand, if the abled/disabled binary is not entirely challenged through this narrative empathy, the fluid dynamic between the narrator and the protagonist may offer some more productive readings of disability.

The Doubleness of Cece/Bell: Contrast or Continuity?

As a narrator, Bell seems distinct from her younger, anthropomorphized protagonist. *El Deafo*'s opening illustrations are narrated by Bell, who clearly states her position as an adult removed from the time of narration, and then continues to act as a sort of descriptive "voiceover" throughout the rest of the story. The first instance of narrator's intervention takes place in the very first panel, where a very young Cece is shown playing around with makeup: "I was a regular little kid. I played with my mom's stuff" (1). The use of the past tense and the word "kid" highlight a subjectivity dependent on the narrator's distanced position in relation to the young character being described and depicted on the page. The use of the terms "mom" and "stuff," on the other hand, suggests that we are seeing the story through a more child-like perspective rather than through the adult narrator's. Therefore, in the first panel, the relationship between those two positions, child and adult, or character and narrator, is established – but the focalization is already ambiguous. Or, as Nikolajeva states:

> [W]e must discern between the narrative voice we hear and the point of view, that is, through whose eyes we see the events … The voice and the point of view do not necessarily coincide, and in children's literature they seldom coincide, since the narrative voice belongs to an adult while the point of view is that of a child. ("Beyond" 11)

Interestingly, Cece does not speak directly until the last panel on that page, where she is shown singing. Bell's voice acts as a narrative frame, and her adult subjectivity is not simply used as an introductory device, but rather as a lens through which Cece's actions and interactions will be seen. On this first page, the narrator's text boxes are in the past tense: "I was a regular little kid. I played with my mom’s stuff. / I watched TV with my big brother, Ashley, and my big sister, Sarah. / I rode on the back of my father’s bicycle. / I found caterpillars with my friend Emma. / And I sang” (1). This signals a clear distinction between the present narrating time and the past narrated time. However, starting on the next page, the narration shifts to the present tense without warning: “But then everything changed. / [Panels show Cece getting sick and her parents worrying.] / My parents rush me to the hospital” (2). This convergence between narrated and narrating time allows for a continuous narration that draws the reader closer to the protagonist – at least narratively, and by extension emotionally. On the other hand, it makes the narrating voice more ambivalent, as the reader is left unsure whether the story is now told through Cece’s perspective or remains narrated by an adult Bell.

This narrating voice that oscillates between child and adult consciousness seems suggestive of what Marah Gubar calls a kinship model of childhood, which “highlights likeness and relatedness” between adults and children while simultaneously “[making] room for difference and variation” (300). Gubar argues that both the “difference model” of childhood (297) and the “deficit model” of childhood (298) emphasize an essentialist and negative conception of children as either what they *are not* or what they *lack* compared to adults. On the other hand, the kinship model that Gubar proposes

> assumes that young people have enough commonalities with each other – and differences from adults – to justify some form of adult paternalism and our continued use of the category “child.” Yet it also [makes] room for the fact that children – like adults – are such a diverse population that we can rarely (if ever) indulge in confident generalizations about them. To counteract the fact that having any model of what it means to be a child risks reifying the category and setting into motion disabling looping effects [comparable to a

> self-fulfilling prophecy], adherents to the kinship model insist first and foremost on how alike younger and older people are. (300)

On the subject of the inherent conflict in illustrated texts where verbal and visual layers are intricately connected, Perry Nodelman states that:

> The doubleness of [visual texts] is nowhere more apparent than in books containing texts with first-person narrators. In most such stories in picture books, the first-person narrators tell of events they themselves are centrally involved in; these are examples of the kind of narrative texts that Gérard Genette calls 'autodiegetic' (245). In verbal narratives of this sort the distinctness of the speaker's perceptions of what happens to himself or herself is always a matter of interest, a focus of a reader's attention; but a picture, even one in a narrative picture book that contains an autodiegetic verbal narration, cannot so directly and so obviously focus a viewer's attention on the distinctness of its narrator's perceptions of the same events. ("Eye" 2)

Nodelman states that words and pictures operate on different levels in first-person picturebooks. Similarly, his argument can be applied to graphic novels, which share common features with picturebooks in their conjunction of verbal and visual information. Indeed, while Philip Nel identifies "three key formal differences" ("Same Genus" 450) between picturebooks and graphic novels, he highlights that these main differences in fact point to a variation in the *degree* of these qualities in each genre rather than a sharp divide between the two:

> One, the temporal divisions in comics tend to be more specific than those in picture books: "boxes of time," though not unique to comics, are a hallmark of the genre. Two, the

> contiguity of words and images tends to be closer in comics. As a result, the tension between words and images tends to have a different spatial location in each—more diffuse in comics, sharper in picture books. Three, comics tend to use *words as images* more often than do picture books—though, again, it's not a feature unique to either. In fact, that's true of all of the differences between comics and picture books: all are a question of degree. (450-1)

In addition, Nodelman argues that words typically occupy time, whereas pictures typically "occupy space [and therefore] lack an easy means of expressing the temporal relationships of cause and effect, dominance and subordination, and possibility and actuality that the grammar of language so readily expresses" ("Eye" 1). Sequential art can offer an alternative reading to challenge those positions because the pictures are, indeed, placed in a temporal sequence as well as a spatial one. Nodelman's argument points to similar interactions in graphic narratives, where the verbal and visual aspects of the text also operate on both temporal and spatial levels. In *El Deafo,* for instance, the tension between those different narrative levels creates ambiguous, and sometimes conflicting, meanings. First of all, the narrated and narrating times (expressed verbally) occur at different points in Bell's life, which requires the reader's awareness of this temporality for the story to exist. Secondly, the visuals can be connected to the verbal text through time (e.g. when the images in the panels correspond to the narrator's description of the scene) and/or space (e.g. when the relationship between the pictures is not based on a sequence of events but instead suggested by their very proximity, as in montage-like panels where the reader's inferences *create* meaning). The interplay between image and text in *El Deafo* highlights the idea that words don't *only* occupy time and pictures don't *only* occupy space in graphic novels, but instead that those interactions generate a particular sense of time and space specific to each story, and that it is necessary to account for those particularities when analyzing a given narrative. In *El Deafo*, the "[close] contiguity of words and images" mentioned by Nodelman (450) is illustrated by the present tense narration which partly describes the events depicted in the panels and Cece's thoughts and emotions at the time. However, the past tense narration on the very first page alludes to a gap between the narrated time and the narrating time, and the presence of didactic interludes that interrupt the linearity of the narrative but remain in the present tense complicates the idea of a complete juxtaposition of the verbal and visual texts. Nodelman also examines the way first-person verbal narratives are often complicated by illustrations viewed in the third person; whereas first-person narration in picture books focalizes through a character's perspective, that same character is often depicted from an external point of view in the illustrations, as if the reader was observing the scene rather than immersed in the character's subjective point of view. In *El Deafo*, different subjectivities interact in the panels: most panels are framed by text boxes narrated by Bell in the first person, character's voices are reported through direct speech in speech bubbles, and the characters themselves are depicted from a third-person viewpoint. Despite the presence of a first-person narrator, Bell's younger self is depicted on the page as a stylized rabbit subjected to the reader's gaze. The presence of these two different points of view complicates the narrative empathy that the text seems to encourage; indeed, the verbal information suggests a closeness between narrator and reader that is belied by the apparent objectivity presented through the pictures. Bell therefore challenges the boundaries, even unknowingly, between the subjectivity of her first-person narrator and the externality of third-person images. But as Nodelman argues, "to read well is always to read with a sense of the doubleness of literature, which requires us to become involved in, even to identify with, its characters and situations but also to stand back and understand those characters and situations with some objectivity" ("Eye" 30).

What Nodelman calls the "doubleness of literature" seems to echo Smith and Watson's comments about the complexity of hybrid texts and their "overlapping levels of self-presentation" (169). In the case of Cece Bell's *El Deafo*, this ambiguity is further complicated by the presence of an adult narrator and a child protagonist who are assumed by the reader (and to a certain extent, perhaps, by the author herself) to represent the same person. That assumption is itself challenged by Bell's depiction of Cece (as well as the other characters) as a nonhuman other, which objectifies her protagonist and further distances her from Bell's own subjectivity.

Nodelman adds that "[t]he pictures inevitably convey a different story from the words. As a result, any given picture book contains at least three stories: the one told by the words, the one implied by the pictures, and the one that results from the combination of the first two" (2). Arguably, this statement could also apply to the narrative relationships within and around *El Deafo*. In this case, it could be rephrased as follows: "The narrator inevitably conveys a different story from the protagonist's. As a result, *El Deafo* contains at least three stories: the one told by adult narrator Cece Bell (in text boxes), the one [represented through] young Cece Bell (within the panels), and the one that results from the combination of the first two." The beginning of chapter 3 in *El Deafo* provides an example of these different narratives. The three text boxes that frame the panels describe the narrator's recollection of the depicted scene, where Cece figures out how her new hearing device works. In the first panel on the page, for instance, he narrator states: "I find out that the little box is called a "hearing aid." It's hard to get used to. Everything sounds funny when I use it. Even me!" and the picture depicts a close up of Cece's confused expression while she tests out her hearing aid, with a speech bubble that says: "*Eeep*. Boop. *Oop*.

Eeep? Hello. HELLO? Ah! Ah!" (Bell 23) She then starts to reminisce about her friend Emma, with a narration box stating that they "have always looked different from each other, but in ways that didn't matter" (23) while the illustrations in the next three (narrator-less) panels are reproductions of polaroid photographs of Cece and Emma playing together. The narrator's text brings out information that is not contained in the pictures, such as Cece learning what her new medical device is called, and the panels in turn provide some visual context absent from the text boxes. Together, however, each narrative layer builds on the other to create additional meaning: the seemingly random words and sounds in Cece's first speech bubble only make sense by relying on the narrator's explanation that she is trying out her new hearing aid, while the "silent" panels that show Emma and Cece having fun create emotional context to the narrator's comparison between the two friends.

Such interactions also shape ambiguous understandings of the text that exemplify ideological constructions of disability. Just like Cece reclaims the derogatory term "deafo" to transform herself into El Deafo, a fantasized version of herself whose deafness is her superpower, Bell provides a reading of deafness and disability as a contextual and relational experience rather than a static identity – after all, El Deafo eventually becomes stronger after her friend Martha becomes her sidekick and Cece's fantasy and reality start to blend in together.

Disability or Superpower: What's the Difference?

In his analysis of traditional American superhero comics Jose Alaniz argues that "the superhero serves as an entry point for interrogating the social construction of the (male) body, disability, death, illness, and "normality" in post-war American culture. [The superhero genre] has served as a disability and death-denying representational practice which privileges the healthy, hyper-powered, and immortal body over the diseased, debilitated and defunct body" (13-14). He later adds that although this ideal has been complicated by more recent superhero stories, it has "by no means [been] transcended" (141). *El Deafo*'s use of Cece's superhero alter ego exemplifies Alaniz's argument but also attempts to address those perceptions in more complex ways.

Bell seems to oscillate between challenging and reinforcing this image of the disabled body by claiming her own disability as a strength – and even a supernatural power. The effect of transforming a perceived weakness (namely, a hearing impairment) into a strength is twofold. First, it turns the value scale of "able vs disabled" bodies on its head and resists those constructions. However, the superhero metaphor exemplifies the problems of the wondrous/monstrous dichotomy in disability representation conceptualized by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and discussed in chapter 1. By playing on the duality of her hearing impairment as both a disability (or, at the very least, a physical lack) and a superhuman ability, Bell places Cece's social isolation on the same level as her superhero-ness; she finds herself marginalized because of her "monstrous" qualities in her real life, and reflects that position in her fantasy, where she is ostracized because of her powers.

Bell herself makes that connection clear when she depicts first Batman, looking downcast in his batcave, then Cece standing in a "bubble of loneliness" in the following panel: "Superheroes might be awesome, but they are also different. / And being different feels a lot like being alone" (46). This highlights the inherent issue with the "wondrous" rhetoric model of disability, which seems to present a positive view of disability while reinscribing the same oppressive hierarchy between abled and disabled groups. Therefore, framing Cece's narrative of disability as a superhero origin story may effectively provide an uplifting ending, but may not actually dismantle those hierarchies.

Furthermore, Cece’s development highlights a semantic shift from “disability” to “ability” that reveals a change from a negative to a seemingly more positive self-identity. To simplify, what one considers to be an ability or a disability may vary depending on one’s subject position within or outside the category of (dis)ability. In fact, the concepts of super-ability and disability are both centered around othered identities, which allows for many superhero stories to be read as metaphors of disability. It is the point of view of the “other” (whether the characters within the narrative or the readers external to it) that defines an attribute as positive or negative in both superhero and disability narratives, an idea that *El Deafo* exemplifies clearly. Cece first considers her phonic device a weakness because she is afraid showcasing her hearing impairment will isolate her from her hearing peers. However, once her classmates learn that she can hear their teacher everywhere in the school thanks to the microphone paired with her hearing aid, she becomes their lookout when the teacher leaves the classroom. She even equates both the positive aspects of her “superpower” to Batman’s own abilities: “Just like Bruce Wayne uses all that crazy technology to turn himself into Batman on TV… I can use my own crazy technology – the phonic ear – to turn myself into a superhero, too! My superpower? Super hearing!” (43-4).

While Cece’s comment suggests that she is expressing her own agency and crafting a way to embrace her deafness as a valuable identity, it may also suggest that when able-bodiedness is physically unattainable, it can or should be actualized metaphorically. The very idea of turning disability into a positive strength is underlined by the assumption that it is inherently negative and therefore must be “overcome” – a stance that reinforces stigmatizing perceptions of disability. Joseph M. M. Aldinger states that

> In conventional overcoming narratives the protagonist is met by some form of social, economic, physical, or racial adversity; this ‘challenge’ is ultimately transcended through an achievement that transforms the protagonist’s life, which has been cast as a personal tragedy. (91)

Indeed, such representations frame disability as something to be compensated for, which reinforces the view that able bodies are to be desired because they alone are whole, successful, or valid bodies. Disabled individuals are thereby ‘othered’ and further marginalized. However, a more relational view of (dis)ability tends to be favored in disability studies currently, as opposed to representing disability through either a perceived lack (the medical model that attempts to “fix” physical or mental conditions) or a constructed heroism (sublimating and thus othering disability as a social marker). In that regard, *El Deafo* does seem to illustrate, albeit implicitly, how Cece’s medical issues (her hearing impairment) and social issues (her difficulties with oral communication) intersect to define the extent of her disability, as Smith-D’Arezzo and Holc point out:

> *El Deafo* offers a story that emphasizes Cece’s struggles in a social world that values full hearing to such an extent that it cannot address her as a full person. In other words, the novel stages the characters surrounding and interacting with Cece as impaired in their ability to respond to a deaf person. … By giving Cece a rich interior life—portrayed through graphic novel techniques—*El Deafo* normalizes her experiences and reactions, rendering the hearing characters as knowingly or unknowingly falling short in their attempts to make meaning. (73)

Moreover, the apparent assumptions made by the text further construct Bell’s young, fictionalized self as an “other”: Cece is the subject of a story told from a removed position, and she is observed from an external point of view in her visual representation. Additionally, as readers saw earlier, Bell explicitly frames the narrative through her adult voice and looks back at her younger self, therefore inviting (or rather, leading) the reader to align with that adult framing/narrating voice rather, to join Bell in looking at Cece externally. Consequently, this may lead the reader to view Bell herself as an extension of that otherness and makes narrative empathy more difficult.

To go even further, Bell depicts her hearing loss as a) central to the construction of her identity (and therefore her narrative) and b) central to her socialization process within the narrative. Because other characters around her react to her being deaf, and because Cece herself learns to define her own identity within that category, she is placed as an “other” both within the narrative and, by extension, outside of it. Rather than encouraging identification with the protagonist, the third-person view in the illustrations reinforces that ‘othered’ position to the readers. Additionally, Bell’s educational tone further indicates that she places herself outside of the norm and seeks to build a relationship of understanding between her (othered) self and the (othering) majority. To achieve that goal, Bell employs the metaphor of the superhero, a seemingly empowering narrative device which in fact offers problematic limitations to the representation of disability.

As examined by Alaniz in *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond*, the figure of the ordinary (super)hero is a recurring trope in fiction to depict some sort of identity crisis, a particularly resonant theme in children’s and adolescent fiction, and more specifically in narratives of disability. *El Deafo* is one such narrative, and the parallels between

Cece’s unusual physical (dis)abilities and her emotional struggle are made clear throughout the story. In fact, *El Deafo* can be read as Cece’s “origin story,” to borrow a term from comic book tradition. Origin stories, or narratives about how characters gained their supernatural powers and/or became superheroes, reveal a common fascination with the psychological motives behind those characters. Cece’s heroic alter ego is the character of “El Deafo,” who wears a red cape and always saves the day thanks to her technology-enhanced hearing.

In a different genre, memoirs act in similar ways to “origin stories” for their authors, which implies that there is little to no surprise as to how the story ends. In fact, readers may not be attracted to those narratives because they want to learn how they end, but precisely because they already *know* how the narrative is resolved and might want to learn the specific events that led to it. Ultimately, for example, Cece’s empirical situation does not change much by the end of the novel: she is still a young girl who goes to school, makes new friends, and remains deaf. These facts were already in place from the very start, because the narrative itself is framed by Bell’s own “grown-up” voice reminiscing about her childhood. What is emphasized in the story is therefore her emotional and psychological journey to navigate social relationships in the early years of her deafness, but her current situation as a deaf adult author is posited by the existence of the novel itself. Therefore, the narrative of disability represented in *El Deafo* arguably pushes back against disability simply being used as a rhetoric device to create surprise or tension.

Additionally, in the American tradition of superhero comics, a superhero’s name represents his or her identity and suggests a certain sense of homogeneity (perhaps illusionary) in that character’s identity. Consequently, what Cece’s choice of name says about her self-image is certainly ambiguous. On the one hand, reclaiming a term to regain agency over it is a common and effective rhetorical move used by people or groups that have been oppressed by that very term. Indeed, Cece stumbles upon the name when she sees a character on TV wearing a hearing device similar to hers. When she enquires about what is being said in the scene in question, her siblings inform her that "the one kid called the other kid – ahem – deafo" (Bell 82). Cece, although perplexed, starts giggling, then goes to the bathroom where she stares in the mirror wondering at her own identity: "Heh heh… Well, if that kid is "deafo"… / … Am *I* "deafo" too? / … You wanna call me "deafo"? *Go ahead!* / Yeah, that's right! / Just call me… *EL DEAFO*" (83-84). In fact, choosing "El Deafo" as her superhero name after understanding the power of perception is an attempt at reclaiming an identity that Cece recognizes as hers; in short, naming is resisting. On the other hand, naming is also solidifying, fossilizing an illusionary stable identity. Cece's perception of herself crystallizes around her deafness so that her disability becomes her defining attribute. As a result, Cece's reclaiming of the term "deafo" seems to undermine Bell's explicit desire to resist the "deaf" or "disabled" labels as prominent markers of her identity and reinforce her 'othered' position.

To delve further into the narrativization of Cece's – and Bell's – deafness, we can also question the underlying desires of the audience. What matters is not simply what the readers think of Cece's story, but what Bell shows them and how she chooses to represent herself (as a character first, but also by extension as a narrator and implied author). For instance, the very fact that disability can be framed as a narrative allows for the necessity of an emotionally satisfying resolution. Indeed, the readers' expectations of children's narratives especially often imply a structure comprised of a beginning, middle and end, where the ending successfully transcends the conflict developed throughout the rest of the story. When disability, as in *El Deafo*, is framed as the central struggle for the protagonist, it reinforces the expectation that something – whether the disability itself, or at least perceptions of it – must be fixed, erased or overcome by the end of the story. Bell therefore faces a paradox: her personal story requires narrativization in order to make sense and appeal to readers, but the very process of narrativizing her hearing impairment undermines her desire to represent disability beyond a polarizing conception of abled vs. disabled bodies.

Similarly, understanding *El Deafo* as *Bell*'s real-life origin story (rather than only Cece's fictional origin story) can be read in a positive or a negative way. First, it suggests the author's underlying desire to assert her identity as a deaf person in a positive and, perhaps more importantly, self-defining way. However, it also forces Bell to comply with the demands of a society that requires disability to be justified through extraordinary abilities in order to be recognized as a valid identity. In other words, the narrativization of Bell's life from the moment she lost her hearing to her becoming a distinguished author and illustrator may play into the very idea of the "overcoming" narrative that she questions in *El Deafo*. Although it is difficult to disentangle the affordances and limitations of Bell's work, this difficulty should direct our attention towards the limitations put around disabled people by socio-cultural attitudes rather than towards a failing on the author's part. Bell's attempt to transcend those constraints points to complex dynamics between her lived experience and intentions on the one hand, and the readers' expectations and understandings of disability on the other.

In other words, and although this may not be her only objective, Bell seemingly attempts to convey a first-person account by inviting the reader to empathize with young Cece and question preconceptions about deafness. In doing so, she creates ambiguous layers of self-representation that highlight a continuity between her narrated and narrating selves, or between her remembered and her fantasized images. By conflating first- and third-person perspectives in her visual representations which place her implied readers alternatively as actors and spectators, Bell uses the conventions of autographics to offer a narrative of disability that centers on her own lived experience, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of generic representation, but also explores the multiple ways in which her deafness impacts her physical and social embodiment. Although not completely freed of some of the most pervasive stereotypes about disability, *El Deafo* makes a compelling argument about the particular affordances of graphic novels in creating nuanced and multifaceted representations of disability.

CHAPTER III: INVISIBLE DISABILITY AND NARRATIVE EMPATHY IN PICTUREBOOKS: PATRICIA POLACCO'S *THANK YOU, MR FALKER,* DOUGLAS WOOD'S *MISS LITTLE'S GIFT,* AND ALAN RABINOWITZ'S *A BOY AND A JAGUAR*

To a certain extent, narrative picturebooks function in similar ways to graphic novels in that they rely on text and images in somewhat equal measure to tell their stories. However, picturebooks also offer distinctive ways to convey information visually, which in turn shapes how readers will process these images and their ideological implications. In this third chapter, I focus on three autobiographical picturebooks whose authors all depict how their respective disabling conditions shaped their emotional and professional journeys. By uncovering how these three picturebooks attempt to represent invisible disabilities visually by encouraging narrative empathy, as well as the implications conveyed through the perspectives they adopt, I hope to highlight both the possibilities and the limitations that characterize autobiographical picturebooks with regard to cultural perceptions of disability in books for young readers.

In Patricia Polacco's *Thank You, Mr Falker* (1998), the third-person narrative tells the story of young Trisha, "the littlest girl in the family" (5), who is starting first grade and finds out that, although she is admired by her classmates for her drawing skills, she encounters difficulties reading because the words look like "wiggling shapes" (6) to her. The other children start making fun of her, until a new teacher named Mr Falker comes to school. He defends Trisha against her bullies and, most importantly, helps her learn to read. At the end of the story, a grown-up Patricia runs into her former teacher and thanks him for encouraging her love of books.

The second picturebook, *Miss Little's Gift* (2009), written by Douglas Wood and illustrated by Jim Burke, is also a love letter to a former teacher, this time in the first person. Young Douglas doesn't like school, especially reading. He has trouble focusing and keeping still and finds himself kept after school by his teacher, Miss Little. Although reluctant at first, he soon starts reading a book she gives him that conjures up wild fantasies in his mind. In the end, Wood also runs into his former teacher as an adult and thanks her for her help and sparking his passion for books.

Finally, in *A Boy and a Jaguar* (2014), written by Alan Rabinowitz and illustrated by Cátia Chien, Rabinowitz tells his own story spanning his entire life until the time of narration. Young Alan has a stutter that isolates him from his peers, and "[his] parents try everything to help [him]: doctor after doctor, medicine, and hypnosis" (11). Offsetting his impeded verbal skills, however, Alan has an uncanny ability to empathize with animals, which leads him towards his future career. Indeed, his particular affinity for jaguars leads him to advocate for conservation areas (the back cover information states that Rabinowitz is the CEO of a nonprofit organization dedicated to the protection of wildcats). At the end of the story, an adult Alan meets a wild jaguar in the jungle and finds a sense of peace and completeness that previously eluded him. [7]

In these three selected picturebooks, the narrative is complicated by the conflation of a first-person verbal text and a third-person perspective in the illustrations. This conflation in turn underlies the relationships of meaning and power between adult/child, narrator/narrated, and abled/disabled subjectivities present in each text. Proposing narratology as a critical methodology to examine children's literature, Maria Nikolajeva posits that "the narrative is manipulated through an interaction of the author's, the narrator's, the character's, and the reader's

---

[7] For clarity, the adult authors and narrators will be referred to as Polacco, Wood, and Rabinowitz, while the younger protagonists will be respectively referred to as Trisha, Douglas, and Alan.

points of view" ("Beyond" 10). In our selected texts, this statement can be extended to encompass *visual* and *autobiographical* levels as well. First, visual narratives further involve not only a reader but also a viewer – identities which can but do not necessarily overlap, especially in books for young children who may not be reading themselves. Secondly, the connections between author, narrator, and protagonist are perhaps more ambiguous in autobiographical narratives, which consequently informs the representation of their (the author's / the narrator's / the protagonist's) disabilities on the page. This chapter examines how Polacco, Wood, and Rabinowitz attempt to represent invisible disabilities by inviting the reader to empathize with the characters through the illustrations, and to highlight the affordances and potential limitations of such visual representations.

Representing Invisible Disabilities Visually: Affordances and Limitations

Suzanne Keen distinguishes between identification and empathy, two terms that tend to be conflated in children's literature criticism, where young readers are expected to "identify" with fictional characters to learn the behaviors those characters model. Keen defines empathy as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" ("Theory" 208). She argues that empathizing with a subjectivity different from one's own (albeit fictional) may be more productive than seeking direct identification, which relies on similarity and may not encourage readers to think beyond their own frame of reference. Keen theorizes *narrative* empathy, more specifically, as it relates to texts that "manipulate our feelings and call upon our built-in capacity to feel with others," (209) noting that it "[is not quarantined] in the zone of either affect or cognition; as a process, it involves both. When texts invite readers to feel, they also stimulate readers' thinking" (213).

In narratives about disability, narrative empathy is often used as a pedagogical tool to educate readers about disability. In our three selected picturebooks, the impact that each author's disability has had on their life can only be fathomed from a more mature, more experienced point of view reflecting on past struggles – and seeking to educate younger readers. Consequently, the way disability is constructed in each of these picturebooks relies on the author's adult understanding of it. These understandings, in turn, are based on a) the author's personal experience, and b) mainstream perceptions of disability that each author may have consciously investigated or unconsciously reproduced (the "ideological I" described by Smith and Watson). Additionally, the choice to visually represent invisible disabilities in these children's picturebooks is an ambiguous commentary on disability discourse.

First, I need to address the fact that the term "disability" is never used by any of these writers, but the conditions they portray (dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and stuttering) arguably affect the protagonists/authors' proficiency with common written, oral, or social means of communication and therefore are *disabling* – a view which aligns with Tom Shakespeare's interactional model of disability described in *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisiter* discussed in chapter 1.

The narrator in *Thank You, Mr Falker* does not mention her condition by name, but the description of Trisha's issues with reading fits common symptoms of dyslexia: she describes words as "wiggling shapes" (6) and numbers as "wobbly" (9), and she "[watches] the top of [her classmates'] heads to see if something was happening to their heads that wasn't happening to hers" (9), suggesting that she intuitively sees her difficulties as something outside of her control, and perhaps related to her cognitive process. Wood and Rabinowitz, on the other hand, both make their respective conditions explicit. Wood uses similar literary devices to Polacco's in *Miss Little's Gift* (e.g. broken syllables and ellipses when he attempts to read) and although he does not name his ADHD in the story, he does provide an explicit diagnosis in the concluding author's note. His avoidance of medical terms within the narrative, however, contrasts with Rabinowitz's *A Boy and a Jaguar*. Rabinowitz explains he has a stutter on the second page of his story and his speech impairment is represented not in the text, like Polacco and Wood's conditions, but visually, by representing jumbled letters coming out of Alan's mouth (13) or by scattering the text on the page (14-5). In fact, there is only one occurrence of direct speech in Rabinowitz's story, when he whispers "Thank you" to the jaguar on the last page (33). In the rest of the text, other characters do use direct speech, but the narrator only uses indirect speech when Alan is speaking. His stutter is *mentioned*, but never *appears* verbally – a significant point whose implications will be examined later in this section.

The degree to which each of these three authors chose to name, represent, or avoid referencing their respective disability is telling in and of itself. Indeed, the absence or silence surrounding disability representation highlights discursive gaps that may prove as meaningful as explicit representation. In the case of representing invisible disabilities in a primarily visual media, this paradox is made even clearer. The authors' choices to reject (albeit unconsciously) this categorization can be read either as an unconscious attempt to distance themselves from internalized negative views of disability or as an act of active resistance towards reductive views of disability – which are in fact two sides of the same argument. Choosing not to label their conditions leaves that deductive work to the implied reader, which may allow for more nuanced views of disability to emerge. On the other hand, this absence of a marker can also lead to more generalized views of disability. Minimizing disability markers can also reinforce ableist attitudes that support the medical model of disability and locate the onus of disability on the individual who “fails” at normalizing his or her own body or behavior. In that sense, representing invisible disabilities visually may seem paradoxical, in that such representation both transcends and further invisibilizes the characters’ issues with normative oral and written communication.

Despite this ambiguity, all three authors chose to depict the social and emotional consequences of their respective difficulties with communication. Polacco’s illustrations, for example, clearly focus on Trisha’s emotions, with an emphasis on closeups of her expressive face. In several instances, she is seen frowning, sometimes running one hand through her disheveled hair or with a hand over her mouth; her frustration is visually evident. At other times, she is shown crying, crouching under a stairwell, or distressed amongst a crowd of students pointing and making faces at her. Seemingly, the illustrations in Wood’s story first depict his feelings of isolation and frustration at being held back at school. For instance, he is shown standing apart from his classmates in the school picture or sitting at a classroom window looking visibly unhappy. However, the illustrations soon shift the happy fantasies evoked by *The Little Island* – Douglas is shown reading the book with a smile and later on hugging Miss Little. All three characters describe experiencing isolation, frustration, or bullying that result specifically from their disabilities.

Feeling misunderstood (physically and emotionally) is also common to all three characters, who are depicted hiding (Trisha), acting out (Douglas) and walking away (Alan). *A Boy and a Jaguar* even shows a group of doctors in white coats swarming around a visibly uncomfortable Alan, prodding him with various medical tools and looking perplexed, unable to explain Alan’s condition or help him manage it (11). Each protagonist seems to be overwhelmed by a different emotion: Trisha by shame when she compares her reading skills to her classmates, Douglas by frustration when he is unable to concentrate on schoolwork, and Alan by the loneliness caused by his difficulties to express himself. In all three texts, the emotional and social struggles that the protagonists experience are more significant to the characters and narrators than their reading or speaking difficulties; their status as outsiders may be an indirect result of their learning difficulties, but it is socially and emotionally disabling. Trisha's insecurity, for example, only appears *after* her classmates make fun of her for being unable to read, since she was previously praised for her drawing skills by those same children.

A major contrast with the previous two examples is that Rabinowitz's stutter is represented in the pictures as well as the text. One significant illustration shows Alan clutching his throat in distress while locked in a closed frame surrounded in a dark shade of red (5). In another instance, Alan is shown surrounded by a cloud of disconnected letters floating in the air, with his mouth open and an anguished expression implying he cannot control his speech. In another picture, the text becomes part of the illustrations: rather than being arranged in neat lines as is conventional, the words are placed on the page in disarray, still legible as part of a whole sentence but separate and unstable: "I can / speak, / but / nothing / has / changed / on / the / inside. / I / still / feel / broken" (Rabinowitz 16). The stutter is mimicked in a visual form that enables the reader to experience, to a limited extent, a similar sense of dislocated speech. The narrator thus encourages empathetic projection through this implicitly didactic text, which also implies a reader who is likely unfamiliar with the marginalizing effects of disability. This technique is similar to the one employed by Cece Bell in *El Deafo* when, to depict her hearing loss to the reader, she transcribes some characters' speech phonetically to mimic Cece's frustrated attempt to piece their words together, as discussed in chapter 2.

This inclusion of Alan's stutter in the first few pages also makes its later omission that much more significant. In the moment when Alan most needs to control his diction, i.e. when he is giving a presentation to the prime minister of Belize advocating for the conservation of jaguars, a first double spread shows him standing in front of his audience, while the text gives context and emphasizes that "[Alan] can't stutter or distract from [his] message" (Rabinowitz 24). The next double spread depicts a group of jaguars running across a vast area of land seen from above, and the text simply says: "Later that day, the prime minister votes to set up the world's first and only jaguar preserve" (26). The most critical moment in the book regarding Alan's stutter is included neither in the text or in the pictures. The outcome that is stated so simply and dramatically instead hints at his success in securing a jaguar preserve, amplifying the reader's sense of satisfaction derived from successfully interpreting this gap in the narrative. Additionally, it further implies that Alan was successful in managing his stutter – but this implication is as far removed from the narrator's actual statement as it could possibly be and glaringly absent from the picture. In fact, it is the only illustration in the book where Alan does not appear, and it is seen from a bird's eye view that further distances it from his subjectivity. In that sense, the absence of the stutter is significant, because it renders the stutter itself insignificant – and, to an extent, removes Alan himself from the narrative too.

To add to this reading, Mitchell and Snyder describe the use of disability to signal difference as "narrative prosthesis," which refers to "the pervasiveness of disability as a device of characterization in narrative art [and] acknowledges that literary representation bears on the production and realization of disabled subjectivities" (9). Rabinowitz's narrativization of his own life seems to rely on the tension between his inability to speak to humans and his ability to speak for animals – a mirror effect that locates his stutter as the determining factor of his professional journey. In that sense, he seems to prosthesize his own narrative, consciously or not, perhaps responding to Mitchell and Snyder's claim that "While an actual prosthesis is always somewhat discomforting, a textual prosthesis alleviates discomfort by removing the unsightly from view" (8). Rabinowitz's choice to dramatically omit the most significant moment of his career from the narrative does seem to make for a positive and nuanced representation of disability, but it may also fall just short of dismantling all normalizing attitudes present in the book: Alan himself, the story suggests, does not even seem to exist without the presence of the stutter.

To take this argument further, the connection between the protagonists' disabled identities and their implied readers' subjectivity is constructed strategically. In order to examine the narrative mechanisms that enable emotional connections between the reader and the text, it is necessary to uncover how the narrator, the focalizer, and the protagonist are positioned in relation to each other. Those relationships, because they are rooted in the authors' own lived experiences, offer explorations of disability that reflect real-life attitudes towards disabled people. As a result, the autobiographical nature of these narratives is significant, as they can be read both as deeply personal stories *and* as broader socio-cultural accounts of the perception of invisible disabilities.

The Kinship Model of Childhood in Autobiographical Picturebooks

A common view of children's literature is that it tends to be characterized by events happening to a child protagonist and related through a childlike point of view (although this generalization doesn't always apply and can be questioned). To complicate this, autobiographical picturebooks contain illustrations that depict a child character and consequently, the narrative told by the visuals may imply that the story is told from the point of view of the child. However, the text, being autobiographical, implies an older, more mature narrator looking back at their (fictionalized) self – in this case the pictured child is indeed the focal point of the story, but not its *focalizer*. This distinction, given the age of the intended reader, gives rise to a seeming paradox: the reader is simultaneously asked to relate to the child's experience (which necessitates narrative closeness) and to examine the protagonist as a subject of study (which necessitates narrative distance).

However, in her analysis of childhood under the kinship model, which she distinguishes from models that emphasize a clear division between childhood and adulthood, Marah Gubar points out that "since selfhood itself is shaped by language taught to us by others, … adult discourse is not a cloak that covers up some true, essential child; it is a constituting factor" ("Kinship" 292). With regards to this analysis, her argument highlights the potential limitations of attempting to make a clear-cut distinction between child and adult subjectivities in autobiographical texts. Gubar further explains that "adhering to [the kinship model of childhood] means maintaining that children and adults are fundamentally akin to one another, even if certain differences or deficiencies routinely attend certain parts of the aging process" (299). Under this model, what may appear like narrative tension can therefore better be described as narrative *duality* in autobiographical picturebooks: the child-like experience and the adult reminiscence operate simultaneously, connected through the continuous identities of the protagonist and narrator. Readers navigate both layers of the narrative simultaneously, their understanding shaped by their own position in the child/adult dynamic, but the fluidity of these interactions between narrator and protagonist means they are not beholden to a single narrative perspective.

When autobiographical picturebooks introduce visual depictions of an older version of the protagonist, this continuity becomes more evident: the visual and textual focalizations that were previously at odds start to converge. In *A Boy and a Jaguar*, for instance, Rabinowitz includes illustrations of himself as a young man, and we can surmise that they represent the narrator either at the time of narration or during a more recent past. The use of the present tense in the story creates an empathetic closeness and immediacy that may be slightly undermined at times when the narrator betrays his removed position, for example when he uses words like "later" that place him in a separate time of narration to the narrated child. However, that same present tense emphasizes the convergence of the depicted character's timeline and that of the narrator, which concludes with a sense of completeness when, at the end of the story, Rabinowitz says "We are both whole" (33), referring to himself and the jaguar, but which also seems to apply to both versions of Alan/Rabinowitz. In other words, the narrated Alan has finally reached the point in time from which the narrating Rabinowitz is seeing the story, implying that may not have previously been operating on the same narrative level but were still very much connected.

To add to this idea of converging focalizations, the picturebook is also characterized by the juxtaposition of first-person narration and illustrations seen from a third-person perspective. This implies that the verbal and visual focalizations may never be able to overlap completely and therefore complicates the sense of empathy or intimacy seemingly encouraged by the text. Indeed, David Lewis states that "Pictorialization … enables the picturebook to look in two directions at once and sometimes permits picturebook makers to play off one perspective or view against the other" (*Reading* 68). This is made apparent by each of our three narratives, where we can observe different types of intradiegetic and extradiegetic gazes: third-person illustrations with 1) characters looking at other characters, 2) characters looking directly at the reader, 3) the reader seeing the characters from above or from afar, 4) the reader seeing the characters as if partaking in the scene, and rarer 5) first-person illustrations where the reader seeing through the character's eyes.

When characters look at one another in an illustration, they are confined to their own narrative space – the reader is a witness or a voyeur, seeing the scene without taking an active part in it. This seems to be the only example of purely intradiegetic gaze, where the viewer's gaze is apparently not necessary to the narrative completion of the depicted event. However, the reader is still implicitly invited to partake in the perception of that scene: what the characters are looking at directs our own gaze towards the object of their scrutiny. In *Thank You, Mr Falker* for example, classmates are often gathered around Trisha, the protagonist, to look at her – once in admiration or her artistic skills, and other times to mock her. Mirroring their actions, the reader who is made to gaze at Trisha acts like – and virtually becomes – one of these schoolchildren. When she is shown drawing surrounded by classmates, for example, the reader is placed at eye level with the children and on the opposing side of the table on which Trisha is drawing, almost as part of the crowd. Additionally, the text explains that "The other kids would crowd around her and watch her do her magic with the crayons." (5) The term "magic" employed here likely expresses the other students' perception, as shown by their admiring faces in the picture, rather than Trisha boasting about her own skills. As a result, by encouraging the reader to empathize with the other children visually and emotionally, the text seems to be *othering* Trisha by (re)presenting her as an object of study rather than as the subjective catalyzer of the story. As a result, this positioning does not seem to provide an opportunity for empathy with her as much as an implicit reproduction of the same exclusionary practices that Polacco condemns.

The invitation for the readers to align their gaze with secondary characters is also evident in cases where the characters' faces are hidden from view. In *Miss Little's Gift*, one illustration depicts Douglas interacting with classmates in the schoolyard (6). Apart from the protagonist, all other children's faces are unseen, turned away from the viewer and facing the fight in the background. However, one girl visibly stands with her arms crossed, and a couple other children are gathered around the central figures of Douglas and another boy wrestling for a ball. Based on the observers' body language, the viewer can interpret their concealed gazes as the typical curiosity or disapproval of a crowd witnessing a school fight. Once again, the viewer becomes one of the onlookers, not simply because they are viewing Douglas from a third-person perspective and align with the other children, but *especially* because the other children's reactions are not visible – therefore, their emotional reactions to the fight can only be extrapolated from limited visual clues.

Wood, in fact, draws on his reader's interpretive skills for specific purposes in several instances. The first double-page illustration, for example, shows a black-and-white school picture where the figure of one boy stands isolated from his classmates, with all characters staring towards the camera, replaced here by the reader (3-4). Here, the reader is given a seemingly objective view of Douglas and his classmates, but is also invited to see beyond this deceiving appearance: one boy is standing in the middle of the group, isolated from his classmates who are grouped on either side of him. He is the only child not smiling, and he is wearing a white shirt that makes him stand out against the dark background. Although this is the first illustration in the book that depicts characters, the reader can infer who the main character is, as he is highlighted by his clothes and placement on the page, and understand the dynamics between the children: the boy stands alone and unsmiling, showing his feelings of isolation or loneliness and in the accompanying text on the side of the page, the narrator mentions that "[he] didn't have any friends" (4). In another instance, Wood describes at length the influence of one particular book on the development of his reading skills, namely Margaret Wise Brown's *The Little Island*, originally illustrated by Leonard Weisgard and published in 1946. It features prominently in Wood's story: young Douglas is shown reading it, its front cover and several of its pages made clearly legible to the reader; some of the text is either visible in the illustrations of the pages or read aloud by Douglas in the story; other illustrations show scenes that Douglas imagines, prompted by his reading, in a similar style to the original *Little Island* pictures. The reason for his affinity for *The Little Island* is not made clear, but Brown's story features themes of identity and belonging that may resonate with the protagonist. In the original book, for example, a kitten wonders whether he is also "a little fur Island" (Brown 23) and later learns that all islands are connected to the rest of the world – themes that suggest the importance of social connection in finding one's identity.

Both the examples of the school picture and the book within a book are twofold. First, they add a sense of realism to Wood's story. By providing realistic-looking documentation to support his claims, the narrator establishes his credibility and validates his autobiographical claims. In doing so, the text also shifts the reader's passive role to that of an active participant: the reader becomes, or merges with, the protagonist's focalization by seeing those artefacts through the character's eyes, which invites an almost unmediated empathetical reading of the illustrations. In fact, even though the reader is actually looking at *an illustration of* a photograph/book, this narrative distance is bypassed by the illusion of realism provided by the visuals. Through Burke's illustrations, Wood provides the reader with visual information aimed not simply at establishing the legitimacy of his narrating "I," but also at inviting the reader to co-construct that legitimacy. The reader is asked to take in the verisimilitude of these images but, although the pictures are meant to imply the reality of an existing book, they can only be, at best, illusions of that reality. Moreover, they are presented in full view to the reader rather than to the characters; the relationship between these images and the narrative is purely extradiegetic. The photograph is laid out under the reader's eyes; *The Little Island* is open as if onto the reader's lap, when in fact it is another book that the reader is looking at, the one framing this illusion. In relation to our larger argument about the representation of disabled experiences through visual media, Wood's use of realistic illustrations to establish his narrative legitimacy may be an attempt to create an empathetical response to his story. By aligning the readers' gaze so closely to the protagonist's, the illustrations invite personal identification with the character's experience.

There are also instances of characters holding the reader's gaze directly in all three of these picturebooks. In *Thank You, Mr Falker*, there are two instances where the image of Mr Falker does so: on the cover and when his character is first introduced (on page 12). Another instance is when young Trisha smiles at the reader as if posing for a candid picture (2). In *Miss Little's Gift*, there are several representations of photographs or pictures of characters with a posed photographic quality – the black-and-white school picture mentioned earlier, a man in fishing gear posing near an island conjured up in Douglas's mind by reading *The Little Island* (10), and later a picture of an older Douglas waving at the viewer (14). Less photograph-like, another image shows Douglas sitting by a window with his arms folded and looking towards the reader with a bored expression on his face (7). Chien, on the other hand, only includes one illustration where Alan is seen facing the reader, clutching his throat to signify his distress when asked to speak (5). These examples all suppose – and require – the existence of an implied reader placed at the other end of that gaze. This visual exchange establishes a relationship and invites the reader to witness and believe the events in the story. Visually, the implied reader is therefore asked to align with the depicted/narrated child's subjectivity, to validate their existence and their experience. For instance, Trisha is only happy, Douglas is only bored, and Alan is only distressed if the reader interprets them as such. The narrator uses the visual evidence provided by the pictures to support his or her autobiographical claims by inviting empathetic projection; therefore, for the reader to recognize the child protagonists' feelings means, by extension, validating the narrator's claims.

Narrative Empathy in Autobiographical Picturebooks

One way to illuminate the ways in which verbal and pictorial information can convey different perspectives in autobiographical picturebooks is to examine how and why these perspectives intersect. In her analysis of contemporary American young adult literature for adolescent women, Sara K. Day examines the concept of narrative intimacy in a way that can similarly be applied to both autobiographical picturebooks and narratives of disability. "Narrative intimacy" refers to the process of "constructing narrator-reader relationships that reflect, model, and reimagine intimate interpersonal relationships" (3). Speaking of the ways such relationships are created, she adds that

> Generally speaking, narrative intimacy is established through constructions of the narrator and reader that reflect and emphasize the creation of an emotional bond based on trust and disclosure. [This] construction employs a first-person narrator who self-consciously discloses information and who implicitly or explicitly signals an awareness and expectation of a reader, either through direct address (which may identify the specific audience to whom the story is being related) or through a more general construction of the narrator's tale as disclosure, confession, or other interpersonal discourse. (4)

Narrative intimacy in these three autobiographical picturebooks can therefore be framed as an attempt by the author to create an emotional bond between narrator and reader to encourage feelings of sympathy or empathy towards the protagonist. Because the narrative is autobiographical, it attempts to convey a highly subjective experience in a way that feels relatable to a broader readership. By identifying clear their former teachers, for example, both Polacco and Wood contextualize their books as real and personal stories grounded in shared experience of American education. However, what matters in their narratives is the dialogical format itself more than the specific interlocutor. Both narrators share intimate memories and thoughts in letters which, although they may *also* be intended to be read by the real Mr Falker or Miss Little respectively, mainly use these figures as pretexts. In fact, this allows the authors to create a personal relationship with the actual reader by speaking to an individual addressee rather than to a broader, more abstract readership.

Additionally, besides this dialogical format, all three picturebooks use visual representations to (at least attempt to) establish narrative intimacy. In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Smith and Watson complicate the typical duality of the "I"-then and the "I"-now of autobiographical narratives by distinguishing between a multiplicity of autobiographical "I"s instead: the "real or historical I" (comparable to the Real Author, and unknowable to the Real Reader); the "narrating I" and its counterpart the "narrated I," which are particularly relevant to children's literature, where these two identities are clearly separated by time, space, and narrative conventions; and the "ideological I" (Smith and Watson 59). This ideological "I" refers to "the concept of personhood culturally available to the narrator when he tells his story. … Because every autobiographical narrator is historically culturally situated, each is a product of his or her particular time. We need, then, to situate the narrator in the historical notion of personhood and the meaning of lives at the time of writing" (Smith and Watson 61-2). Embedded in this statement is the implication that narratives of disability, for example, rely on historically and culturally available ideologies surrounding health, education, or normative behavior, among others.

In the case of the three picturebooks in my analysis, the adult narrator and child protagonist are assumed to be different facets of the same identity, a narrating "I" reminiscing about a fictionalized narrated "I." However, the narrative form requires an implied reader's agency to shape their dynamic. In this regard, each of the three picturebook covers seems to provide a key to its own narrative. Indeed, the perspectives they introduce foreshadow the interactions between the subjective positions at play within each story, where the apparent child focalization is underlined by what Nodelman calls "a second focalization that undercuts desire with knowledge, the presumably childlike with the presumably adult" (*Hidden Adult* 32).

Polacco's cover for *Thank You, Mr Falker* depicts a young girl sitting at a desk, seemingly struggling with schoolwork as she is poring over an open book with a frown. Next to her, a man stands holding his chin pensively and staring directly at the reader. Both characters are seen from up close and placed at eye level, almost as if the reader were present in the scene with them. The book's title above their heads suggests the man's name, Mr Falker, and a speaker expressing gratefulness; the girl's presence in the center of the picture implies that she likely embodies that voice. Mr Falker's gaze, however, invites the reader to make a decision about their own positioning: because the image of Mr Falker draws them in, calling on them to witness the scene, it requires the reader to enter the narrative through his subjectivity rather than the girl's. In other words, the reader is split between the text and the picture, between aligning either with the voice that expresses gratefulness or with the adult that gazes at the child subject. Interestingly however, each of these two subjectivities is found in the opposite place in the story: the adult voice is located in the text, whereas the child's presence is visual. Although their dynamic remains the same, their shifting location hints at the fact that what matters most is the *implied reader*'s narrative positioning rather than the narrator's or the protagonist's.

This view seems to be supported by the way the narrative is framed: on the first page, an italicized paragraph introduces us to the main character, still unnamed at this point, through what appears to be a memory of her fifth birthday recounted in the present tense. The actual story then begins on the next page, seemingly unrelated to that first passage. On the last page, after the story is concluded, we return to an italicized paragraph, this time in the past tense. The narrator reveals herself to be Trish, the child protagonist whose story was told in the third person, now grown up and known as Patricia Polacco. While the introductory passage subtly suggests the recollection of a past experience through the use of the present tense to evoke the immediacy of a vivid memory, the third-person narration is more ambiguous: the narrator seems to be witnessing rather than experiencing the scene she describes. However, the final statement, told in the first person, offers closure by asserting Polacco's point of view as a narrating adult looking back at a narrated child, therefore justifying her legitimacy as a narrator – for the benefit of the reader only, since the narrative could still function without this addition. In other words, though these introductory and concluding pages are seemingly unrelated to the narrative (in terms of timeframe, point of view, or tense), they frame the story in a way that, precisely because it could be dispensed of, seems designed to create narrative intimacy.

Burke's cover of Wood's *Miss Little's Gift* also shows a classroom setting, with a boy sitting at a desk and a female teacher standing near a blackboard. However, in this instance the reader is placed behind the boy, whose face is hidden, and facing the teacher, who is looking at the boy. The boy is holding an open book in front of him, displaying a full-page illustration of an island. The reader is invited to peek at the book over the boy's arm, therefore participating almost directly in the intimacy of this classroom scene. Moreover, the boy's autobiographical nature is made less clear than Polacco's was, both visually and textually. In the picture, his appearance lends itself to subjective projection from the reader: because his face isn't identifiable, this character could be anyone, therefore possibly inviting empathy or even identification from the reader. The title also focuses on Miss Little's actions rather than on the narrator's subsequent gratefulness; his identity is almost of no consequence, although it is understood to be significant since the mention of a gift in the title implies a recipient. Both the text and the image, then, focus on the act of giving, or looking, performed by the adult, Miss Little. The other side of this relationship, the child, is left open to interpretation in a way that belies its autobiographical component, which presumably relies on a specific authorial subjectivity. Leaving out information about one side of a clearly two-sided relationship (a gift without a recipient, an adult looking at an almost absent boy…) creates a gap that positions the implied reader as the main driving agent of the story, which seems at odds with the traditional conception of an all-knowing, reliable autobiographical narrator. The child protagonist – and perhaps the intended child reader – is, to an extent, almost bypassed.

Conversely, the cover of Rabinowitz's *A Boy and a Jaguar* nearly erases any adult presence. The title is superimposed onto an image of a forest in which two silhouettes, a jaguar and a boy, are hiding. They are staring curiously at each other from behind the trees and placed at eye level from the reader. The title seems to simply qualify the two figures, simultaneously announcing a relationship of some sort between them. The fact that both characters are introduced with indefinite articles allows their identities to be flexible and generic in a way that leaves them open to the intended reader's interpretation. Additionally, the only indication on the cover that this story involves an adult voice is the use of the term "boy," suggesting an older counterpart, albeit still an unidentified point of view. This almost perfectly mirrors the adult/child relationship that underlies this autobiographical story, with the young protagonist's life converging slowly towards the narrator's until their voices overlap almost indistinctly at the end of the story.

In fact, one of the characteristics of *A Boy and a Jaguar* is that the story takes place over a long period of time; while Polacco and Wood are concerned with briefer stages of their lives that revolve around specific encounters, Rabinowitz's life unfolds through several significant moments. He is represented as a child at the beginning, then as a young man in the second half of the book. In fact, a significant portion of the story revolves around him as an adult, unlike the adult Douglas Wood and Patricia Polacco who only offer closure to their respective narratives.

Throughout Rabinowitz's story, we see Alan from an array of points of view; from upfront, from above, from the side, from closeup, and from afar. This creates dynamic storytelling, and the variety of perspectives also provides an almost documentary-like approach to the narrative. Generally, young Alan is shown from up close and in detail, creating a sense of intimacy that invites empathy. On the other hand, older versions of Alan tends to be shown either in a tiny silhouette in a larger landscape, or from behind – devices that remove the reader from their more active position and turn them into a spectator witnessing events happening in a faster-paced, collage-like sequence. At the end, however, we return to a closeup, detailed depiction of Alan when he meets the wild jaguar, mirroring the intimate view of his younger self encountering a jaguar at the zoo at the beginning. However, the one illustration where the reader's gaze aligns most closely to Alan's is when he is older. In a double-page spread, Alan is shown talking to government officials, and the reader can only see the back of his head and the desk he is facing in the office of the prime minister of Belize (23-4). This is the only instance where the perspective of the illustrations converges with the narration almost exactly (although Alan still being present in the picture keeps it from becoming a true point-of-view illustration).

These examples point to the complex ways in which the narrative invites the implied reader to participate. Additionally, the intended reader's age complicates their understanding of the story. The child reader may be assumed to be drawn to the young protagonist and relate to their daily life and emotional experiences, but they are simultaneously expected to align with the adult narrator's subjectivity. In a sense, the intended reader is placed in the paradoxical position to look at themselves from a more mature point of view – a seemingly untenable position but one that operates fluidly nonetheless since the narrative makes the closeness between protagonist and narrator clear. The readers are able to recognize the unity of these two narrative agents, and it is precisely this knowledge that allows them to navigate both perspectives seamlessly, perhaps unconsciously, depending on their own age and maturity.

On the one hand, the educational dimension of these stories constructs a reader with a shared sense of experience. The act of looking back at a past self implies that the recipient of that narrative will have access to a similar repertoire of references. Trisha's story is in fact a love letter to an adult teacher who models supportive parental and educational behaviors. Douglas's story places the child reader in the protagonist's place, so Wood himself becomes the teacher who passes on his love of books, real life now mimicking art. Alan's story, finally, is the biographical account of an authority in his field who narrativizes his journey to spread awareness about a (real-life) cause – protecting endangered species. On the other hand, these picturebooks are also narrativized accounts of the authors' lives that can be understood by young readers, able to acknowledge the adult voice telling the story of their younger self. As a result, these picturebooks rely on a kind of narrative ambivalence that is very specific to this genre. They combine the necessity to read the child's story as an *imagined* present time with the ability to read the adult's story as a reflective act from a *real* present time – a focus on temporality rather than age which may go beyond the traditional sharp division between child and adult subjectivities. As a result, the narrative's focalization is characterized by a duality and a fluidity that create a continuous relationship between the adult and child subjectivities at play.

In all three of these autobiographical picturebooks, the emphasis of the story is on particular experiences of disability rather than disability as a social phenomenon. In these instances, Day's concept of narrative intimacy as a personal bond created between the narrator and the reader actually seems to undermine the representation of disability. Since disabling attitudes (e.g. school bullies or ableist standardized education) are never presented as a broader social phenomenon but instead reduced to anecdotal, individual experiences, such attitudes are never challenged. Polacco's, Wood's, and Rabinowitz's are stories of personal achievements and triumphs seemingly detached from social implications. Of course, it is unlikely that any of these three authors explicitly chose to dismiss larger socio-cultural concerns about perceptions of disability, but simply that those were not their chosen focus. However, what these picturebooks do is make room for such concerns by demonstrating this genre's potential to invite narrative intimacy as a way to create narrative empathy, a dynamic which can allow for complex and nuanced perceptions of disability to come through. The use of visual media to represent disability allows readers to alternatively witness and/or embody the character's point of view, while raising questions about the visibility – both literal and symbolical – afforded to those characters’ specific conditions.

CHAPTER IV: MEDIUM ALLOWANCES IN DISABILITY REPRESENTATION: A CRITICAL READING OF HILARY REYL'S NOVEL *KIDS LIKE US*

In this fourth chapter, I analyze the reader's narrative positioning with regard to the narrator in Hilary Reyl's novel *Kids Like Us*, where the first-person narration provides insight into the perspective of a teenager with autism. The reader's subjectivity is channeled directly through a character whose disability is part of the text itself – or, arguably, whose disability is *created by* his narrating voice, illustrating Jay Dolmage's rhetorical concept of "*mêtis*," a form of embodied intelligence that can "[forge] something practical out of [the positive and generative] possibilities [of disability]" (*Disability Rhetoric* 149). *Mêtis* emphasizes the potential for disability to disrupt traditional conceptions of narrative agency, and can therefore, by drawing attention to the dynamics between who sees and who/what is seen, challenge abled-centered positionings. Through a concept of empathy defined by Reyl as "an ideal you can never quite attain but that you have to keep reaching for," ("Straining" par. 12), or a type of "straining toward the other," (par. 13) *Kids Like Us* offers a complex reading of autism that remains open to subjective interpretations from its readers and inclusive of various understandings of neurodivergence.

In Reyl's novel *Kids Like Us*, Martin, an American teenager with autism, is spending a few weeks in France with his sister and mother while the latter, a famous Hollywood director, works on a movie in the Loire valley. While she is working, Martin goes to the local "gen-ed" school, where he learns to navigate (neuro)typical high school relationships with his classmates, and particularly with his new friend Simon. Martin is aware that, at first, Simon is mainly attracted to the glamour of his mother's job. However, Simon's desire to be close to Martin also makes it easier for the latter to connect with the French teenager and his group of friends, and they eventually develop a true friendship.

A significant aspect of the narrative is that Martin relies on his favorite novel, Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (Or *À la recherche du temps perdu* in the original French), which he refers to as *Search*, to make sense of his social interactions. In Proust's novel, the narrator falls in love with a young woman named Gilberte, whom Martin "recognizes" in one of his classmates, Alice. Martin then becomes obsessed with living out the experiences described by the narrator in *Search*, which leads to miscommunications between him and Alice, who at first does not understand that Martin perceives her to be the fictional Gilberte. However, the fantasized connection Martin feels towards her eventually gives way to an actual relationship as he learns to differentiate between his projection of Gilberte and the real Alice.

Although undeniably unusual for any teenager regardless of his neurodivergence, Martin's love for Proust's novel connects to deeper questions about empathy, the role of literature, and his relationship with his father, as Reyl explains:

> Proust's philosophy about the human experience is that it is impossible to really know another human being. This is getting back to the idea of empathy. Martin identifies with the character, Swann, who can't feel anything directly or love directly. He experiences the world through taste, smell, touch, sound. Proust's writing is very sensual. Martin is acutely sensitive so the book he calls "Search" is perfect for him because its narrator is also painfully sensitive. Martin's father, who is French, gave him the book so it is a way for Martin to connect with his father and the past as his father is no longer his primary caregiver. ("Proust" par. 6)

The depiction of the relationship between Martin and Alice, or at least Martin's perception of it, directly echoes the relationship between the narrator and Gilberte in *Search*. Just like in Proust's novel, Martin narrates his infatuation with a young woman he does not really know, but later realizes that his version of her exists mainly in his imagination. In *Search*, the narrator falls in love with Gilberte at first sight, even though she does not know him, then interprets their interactions as romantic when they are actually one-sided. In fact, when Martin first sees Alice, he does not realize that she does not know him (or that he does not actually know her either): "Even though she was wearing modern clothes like me, we recognized each other from another time and place. Even if she didn't return my stare, she signaled me with her pen and her eyes. She signaled that I meant something to her" (*Kids* 9). Martin's belief that Alice is the fictional character named Gilberte brought to life that he even dismisses reality, taking it as a sign that he is just like the narrator in *Search* who mistakenly believes Gilberte's eyes are blue when they are in fact black: "I fell in love with [Alice's] blue eyes, even though, from my reading of *Search*, I know they aren't in fact blue" (8-9). Throughout the novel, Martin then attempts to build a romantic relationship with "Gilberte": *Search* provides him with a template and he replicates the narrator's behavior to approach her. As he interacts with her more and more, he gradually comes to make a greater distinction between his version of her as Gilberte and her real self as Alice. This distinction between fiction and reality is evident to the implied reader, however, who may be able to infer from the very beginning that Martin will have to learn how to interact with Alice throughout the course of the story. Martin's modeling of his social interactions after a work of fiction points to his neurodivergence in a way that can seem incomprehensible to a neurotypical reader, but just like the narrator's initial distorted impression of Alice becomes more realistic over time, the reader's initial confusion eases once Martin's behavior becomes more familiar. This parallel journey towards greater understanding – of Gilberte and of Alice – suggests the significance of an empathetical reading of *Kids Like Us*.

Similarly, the interactions between Proust's novel and Martin's life in many ways mirror the interactions with readers encouraged by *Kids Like Us*. Just like Martin learns to differentiate between his fantasy of a scripted life based on *Search* and the complexity of his actual social life, the readers are also invited to question the boundary between their perception of Martin and his actual narrated subjectivity. As a result, and if this story is read as a narrative of disability, the very form of the novel highlights the potential for narrator-reader interactions not to rely on an assumed abled reader gazing at a disabled character from a removed position, but instead to blur, and perhaps transcend, the binary division between neurodivergent and neurotypical subjectivities. Subsequently, the fluid dynamic established between the reader and the text models perceptions of disability that push back against traditional "us vs. them" hierarchies and allow for definitions of disability grounded in relational experiences.

It is first and foremost necessary to point out that, similarly to what Cece Bell expresses about being deaf in her author's note at the end of *El Deafo*, Martin does not see autism as a disability, as he explains to his mother:

> 'I'm finding out that there are a lot of us who hate that the world is trying to cure us. I think the point is that we don't need to be cured, like gay people don't need to be cured. A lot of us believe that.'
>
> 'A lot of *us*? A lot of who, Martin?'

> ‘Autistic people who say that autism is a way to be in the world, like being gay. Not a disability. Not a disease. Some of us are offended at the idea that we need to be cured. Layla says it attacks us at our core.’ (182)

Martin highlights the common underlying belief that disabilities need to be cured or fixed, an ideology that posits neurotypicality as a standard. This hope is exemplified by his mother who, during this interaction, asks him: “’So, you believe you’re always going to be autistic?’ … ‘But we were trying…’ She trailed off”(183-4). Martin himself, though, understands that this position conflicts with his own desires and lived experience, and this passage suggests that this is the first time he is articulating his thoughts on the matter to his mother. Rather than seeing neurodivergence as a lack or a flaw, he advocates for autism to be considered simply as another “way to be in the world” (182).

Although this distinction between autism and disability appears clear, there are many similarities in the way Martin talks about autism and the way disability scholars and advocates discuss disability as a phenomenon. Indeed, under the now mostly out of fashion medical model of disability, disability tends to be seen as a rigid, homogenous category, and more importantly one that needs fixing; in other words, being able-bodied/minded is the default towards which all individuals should tend. However, the social and, more recently, interactional models of disability have put forward the idea that disability is at least partly created by physical and socio-cultural environments, rather than situated solely within the individual, as explained in earlier chapters. Martin’s “way to be in the world” (182) is the result of a constant negotiation between his mode of thinking/functioning and his physical and social environment. He rejects the medical model of disability but also emphasizes the embodied aspect of his autism, thus illustrating an interactional rather than purely social view of disability and neurodivergence.

Therefore, Martin seems to implicitly recognize the problematic aspects of the medical model of disability and neurodivergence. His desire to distance himself from the “disabled” label may be a way for him to reject expectations of normate behavior and embrace his identity as an autistic teenager, but it also complicates the definition of disability as a whole. There are at least two possible ways to interpret Martin’s claims, as either:

A) autism and disability are indeed separate categories that reflect distinct experiences of the world, and allowing for self-agency in defining one’s own identity is an essential part of countering the systematic oppression of both neurodivergent and disabled individuals,

B) or, internalized stigmatization of disability can lead to a desire to distance oneself from disability by creating hierarchies of desirability between different conditions based on a medical model that does not take into account the socio-cultural and systemic nature of that stigmatization.

While both interpretations of Martin’s reaction are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they reveal the pervasive stigma that surround disability and neurodivergence. Because that stigma operates in similar ways in both cases of disability and neurodivergence, I will continue discussing Martin’s autism as part of a broader conversation about perceptions of disability as a system of socio-cultural interactions rather than purely a set of physical, sensory, and emotional manifestations.

Glamour vs. Privilege: The Impact of Social Expectations on Conceptions of Disability

One of the misconceptions about disability against which *Kids Like Us* pushes back is the fact that glamour and privilege can often be equated, which may derive from and lead to a lack of awareness about the lived experience of disability. By ignoring the specific interactions between social, cultural, and physical environments that influence an individual's experience of their disability, and how those factors intersect but do not necessarily align with other identity markers such as class, gender, or race, stigmatizing and oppressive attitudes are perpetuated rather than challenged. This idea is illustrated early on in *Kids Like Us* when Martin's friend Alice, who is neurotypical, tells him:

> You tell me that you live in this different world because of your Proust book and how your mind works and everything. And you make it seem like all of us here are kind of privileged because we don't have to live in your world. Like you might be trapped, and we are free. What you don't get is that you're rich and you live in America and you hang out with famous people and you don't even notice that that makes you lucky. (*Kids* 266-7)

Later, a confused Martin repeats this conversation to his friend Layla, who is also autistic, and she reacts differently: "Privilege can be confused with glamour, but it is not the same thing" (*Kids* 268). Indeed, while Alice is referring to Martin's class privilege, she does not acknowledge (or likely does not realize) that her neurotypicality shields her from the ableism that Martin often experiences. Alice fails to understand the problem that Martin is actually pointing out, perhaps because of his apparent socio-economic privilege. Layla later makes this distinction between the two issues clear to Martin and, by extension, to the readers. The conflation of both those conversations, however, highlights the intersections between socio-economic and ableist privileges that all three characters (Martin, Alice, and Layla) experience to different degrees. Layla's parents, for example, who choose to "[throw] money at the problem" (137, 268) but are not involved in their daughter's life, illustrate the fact that simply being able to afford proper care does not dismantle stigma against autism. On the contrary, Martin's family do provide emotional support to a certain extent (although his mother believes that his autism can be cured eventually). However, although Martin's life may be made easier by his mother's socio-economic status, which is what Alice points out, he is not freed from ableist expectations. And Alice herself, who envies his apparent freedom and lifestyle, benefits from her abled position in ways that are still invisible to her at this point in the narrative.

In fact, one of the ways in which such ableist expectations manifest themselves throughout the novel is based on Martin's normate appearance. Because symptoms of his autism are not immediately physically apparent, he is generally assumed by other characters to be able to behave in socially accepted ways. However, tension is created when Martin's actions go against those expectations of behavior deemed appropriate. In his mother's words, Martin explains that "new people can be optimistic when they first see my chiseled features, my controlled manners, and my nice smile. [She] says my 'elfin good looks' still make people want to help me. She tells me this is lucky" (*Kids* 7). While Martin's mother emphasizes the social value of passing (as abled), she fails to understand the more problematic aspects of this phenomenon.

Passing, or "the way people conceal their impairments to avoid the stigma of disability and pass as 'normal,'" requires the ability to come across as a member of the dominant group (in this case, non-disabled society) (Brune and Wilson 1). This phenomenon only has value in that it allows members of marginalized groups to benefit, to a limited extent, from privileges often reserved for people who fit the normalized standards. Martin's own experiences reveal that passing can indeed reinforce oppressive attitudes by positing conformity, albeit forced or artificial, as the default "way to be in the world" (*Kids* 182).

It may be worth noting that although Martin uses the term "passing" to refer to his ability (or tendency) to be perceived as non-disabled, people with autism also refer to this phenomenon as "masking" or "camouflaging." Significantly, both of those terms emphasize the more negative aspect of this experience, brought about by the substantial effort required on the part of the disabled individual to be able to pass as non-disabled. Indeed, camouflaging has been reported by individuals with autism as "both physically and mentally exhausting [as] studies suggest the effort of camouflaging is costly for wellbeing and potentially has negative consequences for psychological constructions like identity" (Cage and Troxell-Whitman 1899). *Kids Like Us* focuses primarily on passing to highlight other people's mistaken assumptions about Martin, but although the impact of those assumptions on Martin's self-perception are not explored in depth, passing and masking are two sides of the same coin. While being able to pass is a seemingly positive act that enables the individual to benefit from a certain amount of social privilege, masking is an active process that reveals the underlying pressure put on disabled individuals to conform to ableist norms.

Furthermore, Brune and Wilson argue that "disability passing encompasses the ways that others impose, intentionally or not, a specific disability or non-disability identity on a person. It even provides a framework for understanding how the topic of disability is ignored in texts and conversations" (1). By expecting Martin to behave *normally* – i.e. in socially accepted ways – neurotypical characters around him simultaneously reinforce an othering conception of disability and attempt to erase the ways in which his experience of the world differs from their own. However, such invalidating attitudes reflect rigid binary conceptions that do not account for nuanced experiences of disability or neurodivergence:

> Passing is an act that blurs the lines between disability and normality, but those lines were not always sharp to begin with. … The act of passing occurs on an intimate, interpersonal level and often relates to issues of stigma. As the field of disability studies has shown, minds and bodies are better understood in terms of variance than as deviation from a fixed norm. This in part accounts for many disabled people's ability to pass so often and so easily. Rather than assume a dichotomy between disability and normality, an examination of passing from a disability perspective reveals how the social construction of disability remains fluid. It also informs our understanding of what constitutes "normal," since passing expresses, reifies, and helps create concepts of normality. (Brune and Wilson 2)

Indeed, passing is also problematic in that it presumes a hierarchy between abled and disabled individuals. The very presence of social expectations of "appropriateness" erases and invalidates the experience of people who do not (or cannot) fit such norms. If disabled people are praised for passing or chastised when they fail to do so, it implies that looking or behaving like a non-disabled person is inherently more valuable. In fact, "Disability studies has long problematized the ways in which binarized discourses (such as mild/severe) work to frame disability in relation to worth" (Yergeau and Huebner 280). In *Kids Like Us*, this issue is raised when Martin recounts a moment in his early childhood:

> Papa has told me this was a scary time for Mom and him. It was a time when they understood that they'd been fooled—or had been fooling themselves—into believing I was

> a normal kid who happened to have a rich inner life. When they let themselves see that I wasn't going to be okay unless they burst my bubble, they had to change the whole way they thought about raising kids. They couldn't sit back and let me be me. They had to interfere. It sounded horrible. Violent. (117-8)

This passage illustrates a particular type of tension that can be experienced by disabled individuals (and their families), which pushes back against the oversimplified assumption that treatments to "fix" disabilities are always positive. The description of such interference as "violent" (118) reveals that Martin actually perceives those attempts at "redressing" his neurodivergent behaviors as deeply invasive treatment, and one that violates his self-agency. The text here raises complex ethical questions, and the narrative accounts for both sides of the argument, contrasting Martin's parents' positive intentions with the negative impact of their actions. Although Martin himself does not offer a clear opinion on the matter in this passage, there are other places in the novel where he does advocate for neurodivergent individuals' self-agency in choosing appropriate treatments and accommodations. However, he initially fails to acknowledge that his reasoning is based on his personal experience and does not take into account variances in neurodivergence, as his sister Elizabeth points out:

> "It's easy for you to spout stuff about neurodiversity when you are high-functioning and could almost pass for nothing more than quirky. Do you honestly believe the really autistic people, the ones in diapers who bang their heads against walls, would advocate for themselves to stay that way? I would guess not. I'd like to help them become capable of making up their own minds." (185-6)

It is important to note that Elizabeth's perspective is also colored by her own attitudes towards autism, and the disparaging language she uses shows that she may be underestimating "really autistic people's" ability to communicate their needs, so there is a room for nuance in both siblings' arguments. By arguing against a generalized conception of the autistic community (or, by extension, the disabled community), the text makes it clear that this particular narrative is a personal, individual narrative of one character's experience with disability, rather than a representation of disability as a whole. Martin learns to speak for himself, which leads him to relate to others who may experience similar situations or emotions, but he does not speak for others. Through the characters of Alice, Layla, and Elizabeth in particular, Martin becomes more aware of his position with regards to the many intersecting aspects of his identity, such as his economic privilege, his neurodivergent identity, and the ways in which his ambivalent position on the passing scale affords him both privileges and limitations.

Text As Disability, Disability As Text: The Embodied Rhetoric of Martin's Neurodivergence

To complicate this argument further, it is true that Martin's appearance does afford him a certain amount of social privilege. For example, he is not immediately categorized as disabled by others, deemed unable to accomplish certain tasks, or stigmatized because of his physical attributes. However, this absence of immediate physical markers also has drawbacks. Being assumed to be "normate" is still a charged stance: indeed, when that initial assumption comes into conflict with Martin's atypical behavior, tension often arises precisely because those expectations were not met (which is often perceived by other characters as the actual problem, rather than the very existence of such an assumption in the first place). One such example happens when, after attending a party with his high school friends, Martin is shown a picture of them together and realizes how some of them perceive him:

> "Look how cool!" she exclaimed. In the picture, Simon had his arm around my shoulders. I was smiling stiffly. I looked less comfortable than I'd imagined at the time.
>
> Suddenly, Marianne snatched the phone away, but not before I could read what Simon had written underneath the picture. *Le robot et moi.* The robot and me.
>
> The truth slugged me.
>
> I'm a robot. Even if I have volcanoes of emotion inside, I seem to these kids like some jerky robot. And Simon thinks it's funny. Alice probably does too.
>
> They don't even care enough to unlock me. They don't think there's anything to unlock. …
>
> This dream I've started having of passing in a non-special school, it's just that: a dream. Because even at the party, when I felt like I was doing great, I was still a total freak. Nothing has changed except that I have started to care. (*Kids* 192-3)

In this passage, the first-person narration allows readers to have access to Martin's thoughts and reactions in a way that his friends do not. If readers were to read about the same event from an external perspective, Martin's "volcanoes of emotions inside" (192) would not be apparent, and their perception of him may be similar to Simon's. By showing his thoughts and reactions throughout the story – during the party itself, and in the aftermath – the text offers a direct connection with Martin that bypasses his appearance and behavior. Arguably, there may be a parallel between Reyl's and Palacio's use of first-person narration to draw their readers' attention away from the narrator's physicality, but the authors use this same device to serve different purposes and, ultimately, deliver different messages about disability. In *Wonder,* August's disability is primarily defined by his physical appearance, which hinders his socialization; subsequently, erasing traces of his physicality is an attempt to invite emotional empathy, but it also negates fundamental aspects of his lived experience. On the other hand, Martin in *Kids Like Us* embodies a neurodivergent way of thinking and perceiving. This often impacts his physical experience of the world, but Martin is generally first assumed to be neurotypical and abled due to his lack of biological markers of disability. As a result, all aspects of his condition intersect – the textual (his emotions and thoughts) and the physical (his behaviors and social interactions) – to both create and reveal his neurodivergence. Therefore, virtually bypassing a physical representation of Martin through the very form of the narrative does not have the same impact as it does in *Wonder*; the readers may not directly see Martin act or interact in ways that would make his condition evident, but they are made aware of how his thought processes influence his actions, which are described through Martin's focalization and witnessed through other character's reactions. Even the narrative impact of these two protagonists' physical appearances differs. On the one hand, allusions to Martin's "elfin good looks" (*Kids* 7) reveal Martin's awareness that his appearance can mask his autism, at least for a time. On the other hand, when August is described, his appearance is sensationalized to elicit, at best, sympathy from the readers. So, while August is made into the passive subject of the reader's gaze, Martin himself offers a more actively critical commentary. Martin's physicality is therefore not completely absent from the narrative, but rather intrinsically connected to the emotional and cognitive processes that inform it – it is embedded within the text.

To add to this idea that the text actually affords Martin's autism more rather than less visibility, the focus on Martin's voice and his perspective on the events he describes re-centers the story in a way that challenges narratives of disability framed explicitly *by* and/or *for* non-disabled subjectivities. One of the main issues taken up by marginalized communities is the idea that narratives are often centered around the dominant group's perspective, which often leads to stereotyping, and *Kids Like Us* offers a potential response to offset this unbalance. Author and reviewer C.G. Drews, who is also on the autism spectrum, explains that "the problem with stereotypes is that media will just latch onto one or two things and erase SO MUCH of what it is to be an individual on the spectrum and turn you instead into a caricature. *Kids Like Us* skipped the caricatures and developed a boy who is complex and interesting and autistic" (par. 7). Other reviewers tend to agree, such as disability advocate James Sinclair, who points outs that Martin "may have many of the stereotypical autistic features, such as an obsession, social difficulties and can often take things too literally, however, he is shown progressing and regressing from many of his autistic traits, depending on environmental factors. This is very realistic …" (par. 22-6). Other readers also cite the presence of two distinct, well-rounded autistic characters as a factor contributing to a more nuanced and accurate representation:

> Martin starts off sounding clunky, but as the chapters progress, I was pleased to see he was a person, and not a Diagnosis. When he exhibits autism traits, it is because of him, and not because of a checklist. Martin feels authentically autistic, and not Autism Character #239. … The way the two main Autistic characters act is far too relatable for Reyl to have simply guessed. They are also both unique in their symptoms and personalities, as well as having things in common that explains why they are friends.
>
> [Martin] is not helpless, nor is he simply Autistic when the plot calls for it. He is an Autistic person, and that is very refreshing to read. So many Autistic characters are simply

> AUTISM with legs …. And as an Autistic person, it is nice to read about someone who thinks and acts and talks like me. Someone I see myself in. (“Autistically” par. 3-9)

One point mentioned by this latest reviewer is the “clunky” aspect of the narration at the beginning of the novel. This sense of “clunkiness” may simply be due to the reviewer’s own personal preference, or it could stem from atypical narrative choices like Martin describing details that a neurotypical narrator may not notice (such as the exact duration of the train ride or a precise list of the major castles in the Loire Valley) or the unusual use of second-person narration. These choices potentially disrupt expectations of more conventional first- or third-person narrators offering broad exposition about the story, and thereby allude to Martin’s neurodivergence.

The first and last chapters of the novel are narrated in the second person, and there are a few instances throughout the rest of the story where Martin uses the second person to refer to himself. In the first chapter, the text begins with: “Yesterday, you, Mom, and Elisabeth landed in Paris, France” (*Kids* 3). The narrator describes his surroundings on the train ride to the town of Saint-Pierre-des-Corps with his mother and sister, but despite the use of the second-person narration, which could feel impersonal, his subjectivity is made evident by the end of the chapter, a clear foreshadowing of Martin’s desire to live a fantasized life through Proust’s *Search*¸ and his later understanding of his own agency:

> You are nervous and excited. This summer in France is a chance for you to become someone else. Someone you were meant to be. Even though you have always spoken French with your father, you have only visited this country in your head. Maybe the actual place will unlock you.

> You aren't supposed to dream about being someone else. This is a form of betrayal. You're supposed to be proud of who you are, Martin. So you try to stop dreaming, but you can't. (4)

In terms of narrative positioning, the effect of the second person in this chapter is twofold. First, the second person invites the reader to virtually embody the protagonist's subjectivity by juxtaposing their perspectives. While second-person narration can sometimes act as a direct address, which is another way to engage the reader in the narrative, in this case it is unlikely to be read as such. This is not a dialogue, and there is no attempt to create the illusion of an interaction with an implied reader (as would, for example, a "choose your own adventure" type of narrative). Instead, this second-person narration seems to invite the reader to align with the narrator in a converging perspective. Whereas "I" would signal a subjectivity that the reader could identify as different from their own ("This 'I' is not me"), the use of "you" removes the distinct boundary between the narrator's and the reader's positions. In other words, "I" is how we hear others identify themselves, but "you" is how we are identified by others. Martin's narration is not conflated with the reader's internal first-person monologue, but instead creates the impression that the narrator is taking charge of the reader's narrative here.

Additionally, second-person narration is unusual enough in fiction that it is unexpected. This likely creates some degree of surprise for the reader, which may lead to curiosity about the narrator. Indeed, using the second person not to address the reader directly but instead to refer to a (still unknown) character may cause the reader to feel out of place in this narrative encounter, thus reflecting Martin's sense of displacement in situations where he is unable to follow conventional social patterns. The very tension that is introduced in this first chapter will in fact prove to be the protagonist’s main struggle throughout the novel; therefore, highlighting the relational aspect of the reader-narrator interactions places the reader in the position that Martin will be seen to inhabit in later chapters. As a result, the text reflects Martin’s neurodivergence by drawing attention to the reader’s unstable position, generally held by narrative expectations that may seem artificial once revealed. These unstable positions are, which readers assume by engaging in narratives, have become solidified by the repetition of socio-cultural narrative codes in previous narratives they have encountered, such as the prevalence of first- and third-person narration, for instance. Typically, implied readers are constructed as neurotypical (and more generally non-disabled), and narratives reinforce this by generally centering the abled gaze even in narratives about disability. As a result, departing from these expectations creates a disruption which highlights the artificial nature of such narrative conventions.

Generating new meaning by disrupting conventional readings of disability shows Dolmage’s concept of *mêtis* at play. If, as he states, “disability has myriad meanings, many of them positive and generative, [then *mêtis*] is the craft of forging something practical out of these possibilities, … changing the world as we move through it” (*Disability Rhetoric* 149). This is illustrated by the fact that, while Martin tends to be treated like an outsider when he cannot adhere to social conventions, the text in the first chapter reverses this exclusionary dynamic and instead draws the reader in to share the teenager’s perception of social interactions.

Although the narration then switches to a first-person account through Martin’s focalization, the second-person narration appears again in the last chapter, which functions as a mirror image of the first with Martin and his family again on a train, this time leaving France, as well as in a few occurrences in the rest of the novel. Martin explains to Alice that those shifts between first- and second-person narration happen when he feels particularly emotionally overwhelmed: "'My pronouns are sometimes backward when I get anxious,' I said. 'I start talking through a mirror, where I am you and you are me'" (*Kids* 176). Once again, by drawing attention to the use of pronouns, the relationship between Martin and Alice established through "you" and "I" can be taken as an invitation for the reader to examine their own relationship to the narrator. Martin clearly points out the significance of this relational aspect when he explains why he sometimes mixes up those pronouns:

> Until I was eight years old, I called myself "you" because that's what everyone else called me, and I called other people "I" because that's what they called themselves. Once I finally learned to read, I was mostly able to get it straight. (27)

The parallels between Martin's and the reader's subjectivities are striking. On the one hand, Martin's misuse of second person pronouns is generally perceived as a mistake because it impedes his communication with others, and the act of reading allowed him to understand the distinction between "you" and "I" effectively. On the other hand, the text's use of second-person narration acts as an invitation to the reader to share in Martin's perception of social encounters that do not abide by (neurotypical) conventions, as Martin's perspective and the direct address overlap. Therefore, rather than establishing distance, this use of "you" creates connection. What was seen as a grammatical mistake is turned into a possibility, a rhetorical stance that generates meaning – *mêtis*. And, as Martin himself observes, if Alice calls him "you," then perhaps "'you' has been right all along" (214).

Finally, in the last chapter of the novel, the story comes full circle and Martin is seen saying goodbye to his friends and boarding a train to return home. In the very last paragraph, he concludes that

> You don’t feel like an old man full of regrets who longs after past styles of hats or Doc Martens. You feel like I do. Like you are at the very beginning of your life. Things are always changing, but there is also a solid place that is you. A place where the people you love are not fleeting. A place where you, Martin, in seat forty-five at 6:03 p.m., are I. (278)

By distancing himself from Marcel, the “old man full of regrets” whose fantasized persona the young boy embodied to navigate social connections, Martin asserts his individual agency. Whereas in chapter 1, his subjectivity seemed uncertain or unstable, this passage shows Martin making a clear distinction between himself and Marcel. Additionally, this is also true of the narrator/reader relationship. Indeed, while the first occurrences of second-person narration suggested some kinship between the reader and the narrator, Martin names himself in this instance and although the didactic tone he employs may be imbued with the implied author’s subjectivity, the passage functions in a closed loop: this “you” is Martin’s narrating voice talking to his narrated self, which does not invite the reader to project their subjectivity onto his in the same way that it did earlier. By the end of the novel, and after confronting various characters about the flawed or limited ways in which they perceive him, Martin has reached a more defined self-identity, rather than one mainly based on the way he is expected to perform by others.

A Novel Form? Or: What *Kids Like Us* Offers to Disability Representation

Although the form of the novel is not a new one by any means, Reyl’s use of narration models a relationship between neurotypicality and neurodivergence that challenges traditional binary understandings. Indeed, *Kids Like Us* takes advantage of one of the main characteristics of the novel, namely its emphasis on verbal information, to offer a representation of Martin's autism that includes all types of neurodiverse readers into the conversation.

Significantly, this emphasis on the text is also counterbalanced by an absence of visual information, which R.J. Palacio's *Wonder* also used to comment on the stigmatization of August Pullman. However, whereas Palacio did so by erasing (or actively avoiding) all visual traces of her protagonist's physicality from the narrative, *Kids Like Us* offers a more nuanced way to discuss the interactions between physical embodiment and the social construction of disability. Through Martin's first-person narration, the readers are given insight into his perspective without the visual filter of his physicality. However, the main difference between *Wonder* and *Kids Like Us* is that August's condition is visible, and therefore hidden from the reader, whereas Martin's condition is invisible, and therefore primarily represented by (and even *created by*) the text. Rhetorically speaking, both texts use the form of the novel as a commentary on disability representation, but the main distinction between them is that *Wonder* relies on the absence of visual representation as a means to challenge the reader's assumptions, whereas *Kids Like Us* actively emphasizes textual representation as a means to disrupt the reader's expectations.

To this extent, Martin seems to embody an aspect of di/visibility that differs from the way August illustrates it in *Wonder*. I defined di/visibility in chapter 1 as a concept that encompasses multiple binary systems, namely visibility/invisibility (both physical and symbolical), ability/disability, – and now neurotypical/neurodivergent, glamour/privilege, and even you/I – in a way that draws attention to the layers of meaning embedded in each of those systems. In resisting rigid binary thinking, however, di/visibility allows for more flexible understandings of disability as a whole to emerge. In the case of *Kids Like Us*, this concept overlaps with a desire for all reading communities to recognize the productive potential offered by neurodiversity.

Indeed, the novel allows readers to access Martin's thoughts and emotions and to see the world from his point of view, and it is precisely this "inside out" perspective that challenges ableist framings of Martin's narrative. Since his narrating voice is the default lens through which the reader perceives the story, all attitudes and behaviors that do not fit *his own* frame of reference are perceived as out of the ordinary – by himself as the narrator first, which is then conveyed to the reader by extension.

In this regard, Martin's reaction to being nicknamed a "robot" (*Kids* 192) by Simon is telling. While Martin is initially hurt by his friend's comment, a later conversation with Elizabeth brings to light other interpretations of Simon's intentions, as she realizes: "You didn't mind so much if your friends were betraying you as long as they made it clear that they were betraying a human being" (205). Martin's reaction is therefore not an assessment of the perceived cruelty of the nickname, but rather an indictment of its implications: his friends seem to only see him as a "neuronothing" (205), rather than a neurodivergent counterpart to their neurotypicality. Ultimately, Martin forgives Simon when he decides that the nickname can exist as both a light-hearted joke *and* an ableist comment. As a result, Martin's relationship to such binaries is revealed to be complex and dynamic: his acceptance of complementary (even contradicting) ideas reveals an understanding that goes beyond binary categorizations.

In her essay "Straining Toward the Other," Reyl explains that her intention is to invite an empathetical reading of her novel, but she also acknowledges her position as an outsider to address the limitations in her representation of neurodivergence:

> While writing the book, I sometimes worried that, since I am not autistic, Martin's voice might not be authentic. … I am sure that there are people for whom the book does not feel real. With fiction, this is unavoidable. While I had no choice but to follow the inspiration

> of my daughter [who is autistic] and to amplify the voice she brought into my head, this does not mean I speak for her, or for anyone. I mostly want to raise questions and feelings.
>
> I think that reading - and writing - help us imagine how other people, often very different people from ourselves, might think or feel. Empathy seems to me to be an ideal you can never quite attain but that you have to keep reaching for. It's a kind of faith. As though in a perfect, impossible world we would all understand one another. For example, we could think of neurodiversity the way we think of sexual diversity. Martin at one point compares being autistic to being gay, asking his mother if she would want to "cure" him of homosexuality. Then he realizes he has made a close analogy, but not a perfect one because there are questions of communication in neurodiversity that are unique to it… We've all felt isolated in our own perceptions.
>
> Does that mean we know what it's like to be autistic? Or does it mean we are somehow capable of imagining it? You can want so strongly to empathize with someone that you can come very close. I feel intensely close to Martin, and to my daughter, but I will never quite *be* him or her. For me, so much of writing is this effort of straining toward the other. I hope that *Kids Like Us* communicates to readers some of the joy of this struggle. ("Straining" par. 10-3)

Additionally, she compares this definition of empathy as "straining" toward others to the way Martin uses *Search*:

> Proust's philosophy about the human experience is that it is impossible to really know another human being. This is getting back to the idea of empathy. Martin identifies with the character, Swann, who can't feel anything directly or love directly. He experiences the

> world through taste, smell, touch, sound. Proust's writing is very sensual. Martin is acutely sensitive so the book he calls "Search" is perfect for him because its narrator is also painfully sensitive. ("Proust" par. 6)

In other words, by creating an embodied representation of Martin's autism through the text, the narrative proposes a form of what Nick Walter calls *neurocosmopolitanism,* or an approach to neurodiversity that refuses to "pathologize neurocognitive styles and experiences that differ from our own, and to accept neurodiversity as a natural, healthy, and important form of human biodiversity—a fundamental and vital characteristic of the human species, a crucial source of evolutionary and creative potential" (Walker par. 13). In their critical conversation about the relationship between Theory of Mind and autism, Yergeau and Huebner add that, "Put somewhat differently, [neurocosmopolitanism] is an attempt to think about difference *as* difference, and to think about the creative opportunities that diversity affords; indeed, it is an attempt to think about differences horizontally, as opposed to thinking about differences as hierarchically ordered, or as depending on a hegemonic normative structure of neuroprivilege." (288) Reyl's work seems to partake in this movement toward the promotion of neurodiversity and even neurocosmopolitanism by eliciting narrative empathy in a way that, at times, invites an almost symbiotic relationship between the reader's and the narrator's perspectives.

The title of the novel, for example, provides additional insight into the use of pronouns to invite narrative empathy, while also commenting on the representation of neurodivergent subjectivities. The first-person pronoun "us" can be read at first glance as inclusive of all types of readers, but it is then further defined by the text as referring more specifically to neurodivergent individuals like Martin. Rather than focusing on an exclusionary "us vs. them" binary, however, the narrative invites a sense of kinship, first and foremost. By revealing a narrower meaning of this pronoun in the story (namely focused on autistic children), the text then opens a dialogue between narrator and readers, who may be led to question their perception of the relationship between neurodiverse groups. Significantly, the title phrase appears in the novel when Martin explains that *Search* helps him make sense of the neurotypically-centered world:

> Kids like us watch our shows and imitate what we see and hear. We do this until it all starts to connect with something inside of us. Then we can start to express ourselves. First, we do it in echoes. Then we move on to what they call "variations." It's kind of backward learning. It teaches us how to act. … They call it "affinity." They say "affinity therapy" can help us break through to the outside. (*Kids* 42-3)

The presence of this phrase that frames the novel points to the significance of the reader-text relationship *within the narrative itself*. The way Martin reflects about *Search* in some ways mirrors the relationship between *Kids Like Us* and its own readers. While *Search* is Martin's guidebook to neurotypical life, however, *Kids Like Us* acts like the readers' guidebook to Martin's subjectivity. The readers are placed in the same position as Martin (with regard to *Search*) is throughout the novel. In this paragraph, the narrator's didactic tone is underlined by the implied author's subjectivity, as Martin explains something that is well-known to him but may be unfamiliar to the implied reader, whose presence is almost tangible in this excerpt. Martin's definitions of "variations" and "affinity" imply a reader placed in a student position, but it is not the only sign of the implied reader's involvement here. Additionally, there is a stark distinction between "us" and "them" which seems to encourage readers to identify with either "us" or "them" in this interaction: neurodivergent "kids like us" or the others on "the outside."

However, as Martin is the narrator, we are seeing things from the inside out, so to say, so that his neurodivergent perspective is centered and invites either identification (from “us”) or empathy (from “them”).

On the topic of affinity with works of fiction, it is important to note that, although neurodivergent and neurotypical teenagers alike can be influenced by popular culture, autistic children do so in very specific ways. Martin’s obsession with a 19th-century French novel might be unusual for a non-autistic teenager, but in his case it serves a strategic purpose as a tool to organize his experiences and interact with the world. Consequently, it is possible for an autistic reader to use *Kids Like Us* in a similar way, but most readers will likely read it as an entertaining piece of fiction. Seeing *Search* through Martin’s perspective can therefore be interpreted as a mediation between a purely affinity-based reading and an entertainment-based interpretation.

Additionally, Reyl acknowledges her own bias and projection onto the character of Samantha Mitchell, Martin’s mother: "[her] reaction to having a child that is so different from her is an exploration of my own feelings. She wants him to be happy, but her idea of happiness is not the same as his idea. Many of the questions raised in the book about neurodiversity and acceptance are questions that I’ve asked myself” (“Proust” par. 8). Reyl’s statement suggests that her narrative is an exploration of the personal and cultural implications of (Martin’s) autism as experienced by various characters – namely Martin himself, of course, but also his mother, his sister, his neurodivergent friend Layla, his neurotypical friend Simon, and his first fantasized then real romantic interest Alice. Reyl seems to be conscious of the potential issues critics might take with an autistic teenager’s story being written by a neurotypical author who lacks this lived experience. Therefore, although Martin is the focalizer of the story, Reyl infuses her narrative with different perspectives on neurodivergence. Individually, each character experiences and understands Martin's condition differently; as a collection of perspectives tied together by the narrative, though, those conversations reflect many of the ongoing discussions in current neurodivergent communities and scholarship and create a larger, more nuanced picture of neurodivergence that challenges the social construction of neurotypicality. Martin's conversation about autism with his mother, for example, revolve around her desire for him to mask, whereas his conversations with Layla center about the perceived need for masking in the first place.

As Reyl herself explains, Proust's novel is particularly conducive of Martin's experience because of its emphasis on "time and memory and the power of the senses," ("Straining" par. 4) which are concepts that Martin experiences differently from his peers, and he therefore uses the book "in order to process sensory experience and social interactions. The book helps him to understand the world, to relate to his friends and family, and to connect to his absent father. Ironically, it's a complex fantasy life inside a book that allows Martin to live in the real world" (par. 4). This closely echoes Suzanne Keen's claim that "Memory, experience, and the capacity to take another's perspective … have roles in empathy [and] the experience of empathy in the feeling subject involves the emotions, including sensations in the body" (213). The presence of these themes both in *Search* and in Martin's life invites an empathetical reading of the story. Indeed, the role of *Search* within the narrative and the role of *Kids Like Us* for its readers work in parallel with each other, as *Kids Like Us* allows Martin's experience to be translated to readers, neurotypical or not. *Search* revolves around questions about memory and literature, and Martin identifies with the narrator so much so that he quotes his words and reproduces the plot of his favorite novel in his own life. Proust's work functions as a lens for Martin to sort through his own emotions, express himself to the people he interacts with, and understand their reactions.

Reyl's work, in parallel, serves a similar reflective purpose for its readers, although with a significant distinction: the readers of *Kids Like Us* invite us to share *Martin's* thoughts, which makes it an empathetic rather than a purely introspective invitation.

Additionally, by reading this narrative of/about disability, readers can actively use the story to refine their own understandings of neurodivergence rather than placing the onus of educating people without disabilities solely on disabled individuals. This challenges traditional one-way dynamics that typically reinforce exclusionary practices based on binary conceptions of disability when they position disabled characters as passive subjects to the gaze of the abled-minded/bodied. In fact, just like the second-person narration is flipped from a grammatical mistake to a generative rhetorical device, the dynamic between Martin and *Search*, which he uses to "break through to the outside" (44), is reversed as the readers use *Kids Like Us* to "break through to the [inside]" (44) of Martin's subjectivity instead.

Although *Kids Like Us* is no more perfect than any single representation of a community can be, the text seems to acknowledge its own limitations by contextualizing the questions it raises into current conversations around disability and neurodiversity. The narrator makes it clear that the narrative is only a reflection of his own experience of autism, and while other characters participate in the construction of this representation, this particular experience is confined to the boundaries of the narrative. Martin's interactions with his family and friends, as well as his own thoughts on neurodivergence, open up questions that may involve the readers' different sensibilities, but nonetheless remain mostly unanswered – or, at least, answered by and for Martin only – to invite critical engagement. Reviewers have also pointed an alternative stance, as one critic notes:

> I did wish [the story had] been more conclusive about its discussion on how others see autism. [Martin's] mother is definitely after a "cure" although she's not meaning to be awful. Which is heartbreaking. I did like how it talked about balancing living in your "autistic world" to "popping the bubble" and joining society – but I don't know that it had entirely good conclusions. It said you need both, which you DO, but you don't need to be ashamed of either which I don't feel it said. And they did start talking about "cure culture" (WHICH IS A NO) but the discussion was so painful and honestly anxiety inducing for me (AND MARTIN) but it didn't get shut down properly. Martin disagreed but very feebly. Which is realistic, OK, that's terrifying to be told you're broken. But, as a book that would really really encouraging *[sic]* teenage autistics, I would've liked to see some more definite NOs underlined. The book was onboard with the no, but… a little clearer, thanks? (Drews par. 10)

While these criticisms are valid, Reyl's use of narrative conventions seem to align with her intention to elicit an empathetical reading of Martin's story. Form and content work together to promote neurodiversity, a movement "concerned with the shaping of social norms, the building of new forms of social scaffolding and power, and with changing the structure of the world we all inhabit," (Yergeau and Huebner 282) in a way that Palacio's novel fell short of, despite similar implicit intentions. Reyl's work suggests that although accurate, nuanced, and productive disability representation may not simply come down to choosing an appropriate medium or genre (or specific conventions thereof), the narrative form itself can indeed be a strong factor in conveying that message by modeling attitudes and practices that dismantle traditional conceptions of disabilities.

CHAPTER V: “RESISTANCE IS NECESSARY TO MEASURE THE STRENGTH OF THE DOMINANT FORCE”: NARRATIVE POSITIONING IN HARRIET MCBRYDE JOHNSON’S *ACCIDENTS OF NATURE*

In previous chapters, I analyzed various literary and rhetorical devices used by authors to explore and discuss the visuality of disability. As we’ve seen, most examples of such disability representation rely on creating a narrative relationship between the disabled protagonist and the implied reader that encourages empathetical understandings of those narratives. In those examples, such relationships are characterized by an implicit distinction between the disabled character’s perspective (who is also at times the narrator’s) and that of an abled implied reader, or at the very least a reader who is assumed to be unfamiliar with the disabled experience. However, in her young adult novel *Accidents of Nature,* author and disability activist Harriet McBryde Johnson embraces a different kind of relationship between the narrating protagonist and the implied reader that disrupts the abled/disabled dichotomy often at play in narratives of disability. In fact, *Accidents of Nature* offers potential ways to reexamine binary conceptions of dis/ability by modeling critical engagement with disability stigma through the protagonist’s own unstable position on this binary, which she learns to confront and critique.

Johnson’s novel, published in 2006, takes place in the 1970s. The first-person narrator is Jean, a seventeen-year-old girl with cerebral palsy who uses a wheelchair. She relates her experience at Camp Courage, a summer camp for disabled teenagers which she is attending for the first time, having had little to no contact with other disabled people until then. There, she meets campers with a range of disabilities and medical conditions. Amongst them, most notably, is her cabinmate Sara, a liberal-minded girl whose occasionally forceful activism leads Jean to reflect on her own understandings of disability. The story culminates with the camp's talent show, where Sara, Jean, and their cabinmates stage a reverse telethon – with disabled hosts encouraging viewers to donate money to help able-bodied people – to challenge the abled audience members' perception of disability as something to be pitied or fixed. Throughout the story, Jean's stance shifts from that of being a local telethon poster child to becoming more critical of the ways pitiful attitudes such as those reinforced by telethons actually contribute to stigmatizing disability, and she leaves Camp Courage with a sense of identity now grounded in a more nuanced understanding of the systemic oppression faced by the disabled community.

The author infuses the narrative with discussions of disability by both *showing* (particularly through Jean) and *telling* (particularly through Sara) the readers about disability stigmatization. Jean's character first exemplifies how society at large sees and constructs disability, then learns more nuanced, complex ways to exist as a disabled individual in an ableist society. The story's early 1970s setting also establishes a narrative distance between the protagonist and 21st century readers which may lower feelings of defensiveness for readers confronted with evidently out-of-date ableism, while simultaneously enabling productive reflection about the ways in which ableism still manifests, perhaps more subtly, in contemporary society. Interestingly, an epistolary epilogue shows a letter dated from the year 2000 and written by Sara, now an attorney, where she reminisces about Camp Courage to her friend Willie. Sara, who is now the narrating voice, recollects experiences from her youth during and after her stay at Camp Courage, and mentions "a CP girl named Jean … who wanted to be a programmer" (225). The epistolary nature of this chapter, although addressed to Willie, directly invites an implied reader to respond to Sara's questions. When she wonders what became of Jean, for example, the reader is prompted to share her curiosity and perhaps invent a life for her. Although those last few pages are outside of the narrative *per se*, they bring the story forward to create a more tangible connection with a contemporary reader, inviting them to put the novel in dynamic conversation with their own socio-historical context.

Most notably, the overarching concept of visibility in this novel is a shifting, ever-evolving concept that is addressed by different characters and takes into account the multi-faceted aspect of living with disabilities. The particular ways in which Jean, especially, *views* disability and *is viewed* as disabled seem to provide a conduit for the reader's subjectivity that underlies the narrative's didactic purpose.

As a young adult novel, *Accidents of Nature* offers a nuanced representation of disabled embodiments. Arguably, because it offers a complex reflection on how socio-cultural perceptions of disability both create and perpetuate stigma, this text can also be read as about disability construction disguised as young adult literature. The author's own experience heavily informs the narrative, as Johnson herself was disabled, as well as a disability rights activist and lawyer. Indeed, she had a "congenital neuromuscular disease," although she chose to remain "vague about her medical diagnosis" ("Simon Foundation" par. 3-5). She was also a disability rights activist, and it is easy to see the parallels between the author and the character of Sara, who could easily be read as a projection of Johnson's subjectivity both in her physical condition and in her views on disability. Sara's role as Jean's teacher also parallels the didactic dynamic at play between the text and its reader. However, whereas narratives like *Wonder* seem entirely geared towards an assumed abled reader and reproduce harmful stereotypes, as we examined in chapter 1, *Accidents of Nature* addresses readers on either side of the disability spectrum and challenges social perceptions of disability that may be both held by abled individuals and internalized by disabled people. The implied readers, therefore, is defined by their knowledge rather than by their abilities, thereby modeling the inclusion and diversity which the text advocates.

As a result, Johnson provides insight into what she calls “the muck and mess and undeniable reality of disabled lives well lived” (“Unspeakable” par. 161) while offering an open-ended narrative that encourages fluid readings of disability. As she states, “What I would hate for people to say is, ‘I read this book and I know all about disabilities.’ I’d like to leave people with questions” (“Bookshelf” 16). In her account of her infamous debate with philosopher Peter Singer where she argued against euthanizing disabled children, Johnson gives a witty description of herself that offers significant insight into the way her physicality shapes her identity and social perception as a disabled woman. In fact, her description extends to her fictional characters’ discussions of difference and disability, as she states that “It's not that I'm ugly. It's more that most people don't know how to look at me. The sight of me is routinely discombobulating” (“Unspeakable” par. 20). This suggestion that standards of normalcy, or desirability, are disrupted by the sight of a physically disabled body offers a productive way to conceive of disability as a challenge to those standards, rather than as a failure to meet them – an ideological stance that is developed throughout *Accidents of Nature*.

In response to my overarching argument, this chapter offers an example of disability representation that does not negate or bypass disabled voices and provides insight into the visuality of disability that, again, does not minimize or ignore markers of disability altogether. Additionally, this chapter comes last in my dissertation because of all the examples I have selected, this one provides the most radical and productive examination of disability representation. As Patricia Dunn states, the book is a *Bildungsroman,* but

> What is less usual is that this is a coming of age story about a young woman with cerebral palsy who uses a wheelchair [and, while] Jean discovers something about her identity, … the maturing narrator also comes to see the *world* as a place that needs to change, especially in its treatment of people with disabilities. This novel is a powerful counter-narrative, a critique of society in the same way the campers' 'reverse telethon' is a counter-narrative to and a critique of the real life Jerry Lewis telethons that Harriet Johnson protested for fifteen years. (21)

As such, *Accidents of Nature* provides valuable insight that can pave the way towards more accurate, more effective, and fairer representation of disabled characters in children's and adolescent fiction, especially by reframing disability as an interaction between disabled people and their environment rather than purely an individual medical issue. Highlighting this shift in perspective from a medical or individual model of disability, Dunn adds that

> This novel also handles agency in an unusual way. The disabled characters in many adult and YA novels are acted upon, rather than agents of their own lives. Often it is non-disabled characters who speak up for them, communicate for them, or discover something about themselves because of their interaction with these characters. However, *Accidents of Nature* foregrounds the characters with disabilities as the clear agents of their own lives and as agents of change. The "norms," as the non-disabled characters are called, are clearly the secondary characters and are acted upon. (19)

By reversing the roles typically assigned to disabled characters and their abled counterparts, "*Accidents of Nature* turns hegemony on its head" and depicts "the 'norms' as outsiders, as the ones who don't get it" (Dunn 20). This reversal aims to critique the typical one-sided abled gaze which strips disabled subjectivities of their agency and opposes the perspectives of individuals who recognize the oppressive systems in which they participate to those who do not. When, at the end of the novel, the abled audience members do not "get" what the campers' skit attempts to do, the campers on the other hand laugh and clap because they understand where the critique lies. The reader, placed among this audience, watches the skit happen as it is described on the page and is confronted to a significant crossroads: do they also see the acerbic humor and rebellion in Sara's, Jean's, and their cabinmates' skit, or do they find it too harsh? Contrary to the abled audience members who are just visiting Camp Courage, by this point in the story the reader has been following Jean's journey of emancipation throughout the entire novel and, if the narrative has indeed been effective, should align with her own newfound understanding. In this regard, *Accidents of Nature* presents a narrative of disability that does not play on a strict opposition of disabled and abled subjective positions, but instead privileges disabled agency and invites narrative empathy in readers with differing relationships to disability.

In stories about disabled characters, the plot typically revolves around the character's individual experience, often contained within their own social circle and limited to a personal struggle that is eventually resolved in a narratively satisfying fashion. *Accidents of Nature* narrative does, to an extent, subscribe to this structure. However, more significantly, the novel carefully constructs its disabled characters as parts of a complex web of social attitudes and behaviors which they are at times subjected to, and at times challenge. By contextualizing these individual experiences within a larger social, cultural, and political structure, the narrative equips readers with a better understanding of the systematic nature of disabled oppression. As Dunn puts it, that “Those readers who do not use wheelchairs get some small sense of what that must be like [is] beside the point” (22). What matters most is not necessarily that readers put themselves in someone else’s shoes, but rather that they understand the existence of conflicting perspectives – Jean’s, Sara’s, their own – that enable oppressive systems to endure.

Significantly, Jean’s first-person narration is informed by Johnson’s lived experience of disability, which allows her portrayal of a similarly disabled character to participate in authentic, accurate representation, and her deep understanding of disability oppression due to Johnson’s personal and professional interest in advocacy. Jean initially seems to subscribe to a medical ideology of disability, a framework inherited from her parents and reinforced by the local telethons in which she participates throughout her childhood. However, over the course of the novel, she learns to recognize the very real ways in which disability impacts her own social identity as well as that of disabled people as a whole, and she gradually shifts towards a more interactional model of disability.

The concept of di/visibility, which I brought up in earlier chapters and particularly in relation to *Wonder*, is also transformed in *Accidents of Nature*. The idea of di/visibility, or the particular interactions between disability and visibility (both physical and symbolic), is something that Jean initially experiences. Abled people’s assumptions and expectations of her, although generally well-meaning, are articulated around both the visible markers of difference that set her apart from the norm and, at the same time, the removal of agency that invisibilizes parts of her identity. However, Jean gradually comes to personal realizations about her place as a disabled individual that enable her to challenge and reject that paradoxical position. That is not to say that she can never experience the downsides of di/visibility again, but rather that she recognizes it as an ableist and simplistic view of disability which she chooses not to endorse anymore. In *Wonder*, August's di/visibility was artificially resolved by an overly positive ending which suggested that he was suddenly accepted and liked by everyone around him. In this novel, however, di/visibility is an essential paradox of the disabled condition and, once acknowledged, it can then be confronted critically – bringing with it a radical shift in self-identity for Jean.

Jean's Shifting Positioning as a Conduit for the Reader's Subjectivity

Throughout the narrative, the perspective at play in *Accidents of Nature* is Jean's, the narrator and protagonist, who describes her first experience of Camp Courage and her emotional and intellectual reassessment of her condition. However, most of her introspective moments are initiated (either directly or indirectly) by her friend Sara and, as such, the narrative is centered principally on Jean and Sara's relationship. Their dynamic is heavily didactic, with Sara positioned as a teacher figure and Jean as a learner. Indeed, Sara lectures Jean on many topics regarding disability perception and disability rights. This leads Jean to reflect on her own internalized beliefs about disability, and although she occasionally resists Sara's rather forceful methods, she eventually comes to adopt similar views to her friend's.

As a result, the readers are placed in the same position as Jean, as observers of the camp and students learning to dismantle oppressive practices and attitudes. However, adopting Jean's perspective can of course have different implications for abled and disabled readers. While for a disabled reader, Jean's narrative arc is a story of self-realization and liberation, for an abled reader it is a story about the impossibility to completely reconcile abled and disabled consciousness. When Jean leaves Camp Courage, she comes to that very conclusion:

> I'll never be "just like a normal girl." … I am going on a path of my own, a road [my family] cannot take. I'll be alone, a separate person, even if, physically, I remain as close

> to them as ever. I’ll take food from their hands, depend on them, live with them in love and harmony, but I will remain incomprehensible. Perhaps I will indulge them and let them think they understand, but they never will. (223-4)

Just like Jean’s family, abled readers may not be able to fully understand her experience as a disabled young woman, but it is her (and therefore the readers’) awareness of this fact which is significant. Johnson’s novel articulates the necessity to challenge the ableist status quo by offering, rather than a full resolution, a convergence of perspectives towards a common goal. By allowing Jean to come to this realization slowly and critically, Johnson leads the reader through this same learning process and, in the end, lets them symbolically embark on the car journey home either as a newly self-aware Jean or as her supportive family members.

To that effect, Jean’s role can be interpreted as a conduit for the readers’ subjectivity, with Sara acting as her counterpart and channeling the author’s subjectivity. In that regard, this novel reads almost as a treatise on disability under the guise of young adult literature. Indeed, the main characters’ relationship models the reader’s relationship with the text and, to a certain extent, with the implied author. The narrative therefore grounds this discussion by providing fictional illustrations of the issues it raises.

One aspect of the novel that supports the use of a personal, anecdotal perspective to illuminate broader socio-cultural phenomena is the fact that Jean’s self-perception and her perception of other disabled bodies are closely entangled. In fact, throughout the narrative, she undergoes an emotional and intellectual transformation by learning to look at others and to reflect that gaze onto her own body. At the beginning of the story, Jean’s sense of self seems to derive principally from others’ perceptions of her. Her identity is directed outwards: she responds to people’s expectations of her without questioning their motives. Jean’s meeting with camp counselor Sue when her parents drop her off at camp illustrates the main aspects of her self-identity:

> Sue jumps back in. “Hey, that’s a really cute outfit.” It’s a culotte suit in a funny print—the words NO NO NO NO NO repeated all over.
>
> Dad’s still grinning, and I know what’s coming. “Like I told her this morning: Just look at those clothes to remember what to tell the boys at camp!” He rubs my head the same way he rubbed it this morning when he made the same joke, the same way he always rubs his best dog. (Johnson 6-7)

The comparison between her father’s treatment of his dog and his treatment of his daughter highlights Jean’s awareness that abled people’s attitudes towards disabled people can be very demeaning, even unwittingly, as evidenced by her father’s love and good intentions. Although at this point in the story she is not yet overtly critical of such attitudes, the phrase foreshadows her later questioning of ableist behaviors. More subtly, though, Jean’s outfit, or at least other people’s interpretation of it, symbolizes how she is first viewed: she is a body to be gazed at, whether in awe or in wonder. Jean’s limited agency is further underlined when she “laughs [at her father’s joke but hopes] the talking will end soon and they’ll take [her] out of the sun”(6), or when she describes being “handed over” (7) from her parents to Sue, in a passive voice that connotes a transaction rather than an interaction. Significantly, the message she carries, very literally, all over herself (“No”) is seemingly treated as a moot point: Jean is not in a place to refuse being helped, nor does she voice her consent to be handled. Another instance further reveals her parents’ naïve and misguided position, which again is still unchallenged by Jean at this point in the story:

> “At any rate,” Mom says, “… She’s never let cerebral palsy hold her back.”
>
> I shrug. I feel no need to prove anything, but if this is what my parents want, I can indulge them. …
>
> “I know she’ll have a great time. You’re not nervous, are you?”
>
> It takes me by surprise, her turning from my parents to me without warning, and I’m not ready to talk. I’m struggling to get words out, and I realize I don’t even know what words I’m going for. (6)

It is clear that Jean relinquishes most of her physical agency to her parents, partly because her mobility and expression are impaired and she therefore depends on their help, but her surprise when Sue attempts to engage with her directly reveals that she does not even expect to be given that agency in the first place. She is unable to respond to Sue, or to challenge her parents, because she has learned to conflate her dependence on them with a total negation of her own physical agency. This can be connected to the fact that Jean also defers to her parents’ assumption that their daughter is “just like a normal girl” (16). This assumption, however, is limiting because it assumes that equal standards of opportunity apply to every individual regardless of ability, but simultaneously ignores the fact that some people with disabilities need accommodations and support in order to meet those same standards. By treating their daughter “just like [any other] normal girl” (16), Jean’s parents seem to reproduce a form of wishful thinking that dismisses Jean’s specific needs and affordances, and how those affect her life in very concrete ways. As a result, Jean has internalized a self-identity based on her capacity to perform like an able-bodied child or, when unable to do so successfully, to paradoxically *tend towards* this unattainable ideal, for instance by humoring her father rather than expressing her discomfort in the heat. However, her emotional and intellectual journey throughout the narrative will challenge this moot initial stance.

In fact, when Jean meets other disabled campers, it is clear that Jean's perception of them reflects her parents' distanced attitude towards disability. When she initially meets Dolly, who also has cerebral palsy, Jean states: "clearly there's no point in trying to have a conversation with her. She's talking CP talk. I can't understand at all" (8). She distances herself from Dolly by relegating her cabinmate to the status of an almost inanimate object, mirroring to some extent the way her parents acted towards her earlier. Significantly, Jean later explains to Sara, who calls all campers Crips[8] without distinction, that she "[doesn't] think of [herself] as crip-pled. [She's] like eve-ry-one else" (17). Although she is aware that she is disabled, her reluctance to identify with the disabled community reflects the internalized stigma she is still holding at this point in the narrative. In an interesting parallel, when Sara humorously describes the camp counselors as "outrageously healthy, preprofessional types [seeking] a little real-world experience" (24), Jean defends them by arguing that Sara's description "makes them seem like comic-strip characters when, really, they're just normal people" (24). Therefore, while Sara jokingly attempts to reverse the stereotyping often endured by disabled people, Jean does not grasp the underlying

---

[8] The term "Crip" (capitalized, and short for "crippled") is used throughout the novel to refer to disabled individuals. Although the term is generally seen as problematic today, its use in the narrative reflects attempts to reclaim offensive terminology as well as the context in which the novel takes place. As such, it will be used in this chapter when quoting the text, with the awareness that linguistic usage is informed by and reflects the socio-historical context.

implication. Her resistance suggests that she aligns her perspective, if not even her self-identity, with the abled camp counselors rather than with the disabled campers.

We are given further insight into Jean's positioning through her descriptions of the situations and people she encounters. Indeed, she spends a lot of time observing her surroundings and the vocabulary that she employs reflects the way her gaze evolves throughout the narrative. At first, for example, Jean "[tries] not to look, [tries] not to listen" (9) to Dolly, even though she gives a detailed description of her cabinmate's posture in her wheelchair. This tension illustrates "The contradiction between the desire to stare and the social prohibitions against it [that fills] staring encounters with angst" (Garland-Thomson 6). This also echoes my definition of di/visibility as a state of ambivalent visibility or invisibility with regards to one's disabled identity. Jean's conflicting desires – to stare or not to stare? – are very similar to abled people's inquisitive looks towards disabled people, as she alternatively recognizes herself in some of her disabled peers and attempts to distance herself from them. Combined with her complex relationship to bodily autonomy, self-image, and identity, Jean's staring is an act of resistance as much as it is an act of reflection. In that sense, her uncertainty reveals that it is not the act of staring in and of itself that produces oppression, but rather the imbalance of power that it potentially enacts. Jean negotiates these contradictions by, at first, aligning her gaze with that of an abled outsider to the disabled community, in an artificial position of normativity. August, in Palacio's novel, does a similar thing: even when he is the narrator, he is only seen through the perspective of (non-disabled) others. *Wonder* falls short of actually challenging the ableist perspective it aims to address precisely because it relies on it. Jean's narrative arc, however, goes a step further by critically shifting the protagonist's perspective over the course of the novel. In the end, her impulse to stare, to make sense of what does not immediately appear to fall into easy categories of normativity, becomes evidence that the act of looking at disabled individuals is a complex, unstable process that requires constant negotiation.

Other incidents further highlight Jean's discomfort with disabled bodies, and especially with the physicality of disability. Her friend's Willie's appearance, for example, is a shock to her when she first meets him. She describes Willie as "an explosion of ugliness" whose face "is just too much," so much so that Jean's "panicking eyes jump back to Sara, Sara who now represents a place of safety" (12). Her first instinct is to express to him that "he must be so brave, to go to college, to face everyone looking like that," (12) a patronizing thought that reveals internalized stigma, as such attitudes further ostracize individuals whose appearance does not conform to the norm. However, Sara later expresses an inherent paradox in Willie's hyper-visibility:

> "You know, I knew him for three years, and then I realized I never looked at him. I'd talk to him by the hour, but I never looked at him. Well, this really upset me, because I thought, if I won't look at him, who on earth will? So, that very minute, I looked him in the face, and I mean right straight at him. And—this is really funny—he hated it! He tried not to show it, but he was really squirming! So then, I told myself, to hell with this! I'm gonna look at him, and he and I are both gonna like it! And eventually we did. Now I almost think he's beautiful, because he looks like Willie and no one else in the world." (48)

As Sara points out, Willie's appearance, while striking enough to make him stand out even amongst his disabled peers, also grants him a certain type of invisibility. This is what I termed "di/visibility" in chapter 1, as August Pullman's appearance puts him in a similar state of physical visibility and subjective invisibility in *Wonder*. Sara's insistence to really *look* at Willie and to find him "almost … beautiful" for his uniqueness suggests that a way to resist this di/visibility could be to lean into it (48). In other words, although her active staring initially feels counterintuitive, Sara is in fact restoring a more literal relationship between the subject who is *looking* and the object which is *looked at*. By gazing at someone who looks out of the ordinary in order to make sense of this unusual sight, Sara takes the opposite approach to the learned behavior of avoidance and creates a more direct, personal bond with Willie as an individual rather than merely as a visible marker of disability or a walking stereotype. Although it could be construed that Sara's directness negates Willie's autonomy in that interaction, it's important to note that Willie is not depicted as a passive participant subjected to Sara's agency. Rather, their relationship throughout the story is characterized by playful banter about Willie's appearance and Sara's personality. In this particular instance, the tone of this passage suggests that Willie's discomfort stems more from Sara's unfamiliar approach rather than with any personal offense caused, although the reader is not given any insight into Willie's reaction outside of Sara's recollection.

Jean expresses a similar thought when, towards the end of the story, she starts taking pictures of campers to keep as souvenirs, and she describes one she took of Margie:

> I can see how the photo will look in my album. When my folks flip to that page, they'll probably ask, "What's wrong with the colored girl?" I'll have to tell them Margie is mentally retarded. Mildly. For a second, I wish, for Margie's sake, that I hadn't taken the picture. But then, my folks ought to know about her. How nice she is. How helpful. I can make them understand. I think I'll use up the whole roll of film. (139)

Here, Jean also initially feels an impulse to avoid looking at Margie, or talking about her – thus further invisibilizing her disability by extension. But she realizes that this desire to protect her parents' or Margie's sensitivity in fact does a disservice to all of them. Jean then decides to not shield her parents from the reality of Margie's condition, and to simultaneously do justice to her friend's qualities and complexities – beyond the surface impression an outside perspective may get from a still photograph.

The acts of gazing at Willie's face and gazing at Margie's picture highlight some weighty implications. Significantly, whereas Willie's condition is highly visible, Margie's is largely invisible (at least on a still photograph). Therefore, the common denominator is the gaze that is directed towards these characters rather than their position as subjects of that gaze. In other words, the di/visibility which these characters experience reflects Jean's implicit understanding of disability as a constructed category rather than simply as an individual experience.

In another instance of highlighted physicality, which takes places when the campers go swimming for the first time, Jean takes on an observer's role that reveals the beginning of a shift in her perception of disability:

> We come to the lake in bathing suits and lay our towels on the strip of white sand at the shore. Other things too are dropped there: seven or eight wheelchairs, assorted crutches and canes, chest harnesses for hearing aids, helmets, and arms like Captain Hook's. A pair of full leg braces, joined at the top, lie with a back and neck brace. In steel, leather, and canvas, it's the shell of an exoskeletal camper.
>
> Here's a boy I've seen before. I took him for a walkie-talkie in the lodge yesterday. Now he sits on a towel, disconnects both legs, and drops them on the ground. At first glance, what's left of him looks like a half boy, literally truncated, a wartime fatality, you'd think. But then I watch him cross the sand on his rump and two strong arms. Free of the

> weight of fake legs, he speeds into the water, a place where the lackings of legless creatures are unimportant.
>
> A boy counselor straps me into a life vest and walks me into the cold black water. With every step, I make a big splash and feel my heels push deep into the sand. My long legs don't work right, but I'm proud to have them, proud in fact of all my body parts. At the same time, I'm not disgusted by the others, people with pieces missing or mangled. I count it a rare privilege to see them all without their coverings, their equipment, their attachments, their replacement parts, as they really are, in all their strange variety. (34-5)

Here, negative and empowering terminology play against each other: in the second paragraph, for example, a boy is described as both looking like a "wartime fatality" and being strong and fast without his cumbersome prosthetic legs (35). Jean contrasts the first impression an outsider may glean ("you'd think") with more nuanced observations that go against limiting stereotypes (35). As a result, her description of the body parts that she is "proud" to have even when they "don't work right" suggests an appreciation of her own physicality that she rarely expressed until then (35).

As the story progresses, Jean's sense of self becomes more and more entangled with her disabled peers. Whereas at the beginning of the novel she distanced herself from the other campers by aligning her perspective with her abled counterparts, her subjectivity appears more fluid. In her description of her cabinmates getting ready for the night, Jean reveals a newfound sense of embodied resonance: "As I watch them lying oblivious to my watching, they lose their distinctness. They become part of me" (52). Later on, she becomes even more conscious of this shift in her identity when she states that: “This is how my days start now. I’ve become subject to a routine that has made me part of this place, has merged me with the others, and now governs our collective movements” (75). She now recognizes and sees herself as part of the disabled community around her, rather than as a disconnected observer. As Dunn states, “In the early days of her stay, … Jean’s descriptions of her fellow campers are graphic and distant. She sees them through an ableist perspective, not as individuals” (24). Throughout the story, however, Jean gains appreciation for the complex and varied identities of the disabled people around her: “the eyebrow tapper” (*Accidents* 9, 10) becomes “Mary;” Dolly’s “CP talk” that Jean initially could not “understand at all” (8) is later transcribed through direct speech, implying that Jean has grown accustomed to her cabinmate’s mannerisms; and, after Robert’s meltdown, Jean is the first person to realize what his hand gestures mean and explains to her confused peers that he is miming a “push-but-ton-phone” (66).

Jean’s gradual increase in comfort with her disabled peers is especially evident when Jean starts connecting her own physicality to that of another camper with cerebral palsy, echoing her earlier encounter with Dolly. While she immediately distanced herself from Dolly at the beginning of the novel, Jean is now struck by the similarities in which hers and the unnamed girl’s body work, and tellingly contrasts both their bodies to that of a female counselor who is helping the other girl. This three-way comparison prompts Jean to shift her perspective, from one that aligned with able-bodied counselors to one that recognizes the common stigma that she and the other girl face:

> The spazzo looks up and grins a silly grin of thanks. It is the same grin I always see in photographs of myself. The natural grin of a spazzo. And then I know: That absurd body is exactly like my own. …

> Watching it in motion, I despise that spazzo's body and my own. The normal girl's body is made up of lovely curves, a perfection of balance and proportion. Her movements reflect the harmony of her physical composition. … The spazzo is nothing but straight lines and angles. Her pieces move separately and sequentially, when she can get them to move at all. For her portrait a stick figure would do. (151)

Jean draws a harsh comparison between the counselor's "perfection of balance and proportion" (151) and the other CP girl's "straight lines and angles" (151) in a way that suggests she is looking at the latter from an internalized abled-bodied perspective. However, her positioning is ambiguous: on the one hand, she is explicitly identifying with the CP girl and, through her, expressing contempt for her own body. On the other hand, this may also serve as a commentary on the way she is (or imagines to be) perceived by non-visibly disabled people. Symbolically, witnessing the visual (a)symmetry of these two girls allows Jean to adopt a removed, somewhat objective perspective. Then, by using such negatively charged language to describe the CP girl, she acknowledges at least a feeling of injustice, if not perhaps anger or frustration, at the way her own visuality is reflected to her.

Throughout the novel, Jean explores her unstable positioning with a sense of physical and symbolic tension which is illustrated by the running metaphor of keeping balance. Indeed, in several instances, she describes the counteracting forces in her body in a way that highlights her mental state, which echoes the contrasting phrases in the passage quoted above: Jean seems to instinctively "despise" her own body but in the same moment undergoes a transformation that leaves her in awe of the "powerful energy" created in this situation (151). This tension is reiterated a number of times throughout the narrative, first exemplified in the literal tension in

Jean’s body caused by involuntary muscle spasms: “I can’t force myself to relax, but I reestablish the tension and countertension that will stop the crazy movements and let me look calm” (125). Her description of the other CP girl also describes how “muscles ripple—back, neck, shoulders, stomach, arms, legs. Ridges rise and fall as the voluntary muscles struggle against the resistance of involuntary spastic motions. The big muscle groups are plainly visible at work beneath tight skin” (150). The biological aspect of the tension Jean describes then gives way to more symbolic considerations. When the girl eventually sits down in her wheelchair, Jean states that the air

> has been transformed. It is electric. A powerful energy is at work, but not the kind of force that knocks its objects flat or blows them to bits. Rather, its action is invisible. I am the object of two opposing forces in perfect equilibrium, a magnetism borne of fascination and horror. Thus attracted and repelled, suspended between two poles, I am powerless to move. It could be called inertia. But, sitting still and silent, I am hardly a body at rest. (152)

From the tension in Jean’s physicality, we are moving on to the tension in her emotional response. As she reflects on her new appreciation of her own condition through her realizations about the other girl’s appearance, Jean states that she has “never felt this way before. Off balance” (159). This off-balance sensation appears both physical and symbolic: Jean is working through her own feelings towards her body and her disability, simultaneously recognizing that her movements are not conventionally controlled or graceful and that her own way to move through the world can be powerful and celebrated outside of ableist norms. In addition, the epigraph of Chapter 9 gives us some indication of the deeper implications of this tension/countertension metaphor: “Resistance is necessary to measure the strength of the dominant force" (187). This idea of interconnected forces strongly echoes Shakespeare's definition of the interactional model of disability as a network of interactions between a body and its physical, social, and emotional environment. Jean's comments suggest that those negotiations are always dynamic and situational, and that she is realizing the generative power (or, as Dolmage calls it, *mêtis*) that comes with this awareness.

At the end of the novel, Sara's parting words to Jean are particularly striking: "I thought you either resist or you are a no-good weasel. But you don't stay furious all the time, and you're no weasel" (218). Jean seems to embody a new, generative way to conceptualize the interaction between opposing forces – whether literal or symbolic: her push and pull relationship with the world around her indicates her desire to both be a part of that world and to resist a system that does not accommodate her. Those desires are not necessarily antithetical: as Sara points out, it is not an "either/or" issue, but rather an opportunity to think beyond binary oppositions, such as ability and disability for instance, and engage with the affordances and limitations of disabled people more critically. Jean herself comes to this conclusion, emphasizing the possibility of multiple forces working in conjunction with one another:

> My old, automatic optimism is gone. Gone for good, I think. In its place I feel the seed of a different kind of hope, a heart that knows what rage is like and trust that lives with open eyes. Even in my turmoil, I can inventory my strengths. I am smart. I know how to work hard. I am loved.
>
> … I have to believe that, although now I know that nothing is certain. One thing, however, I believe is almost certain: I'll never be "just like a normal girl." What I will be is beyond my imagining.

> … My family ask no questions. I know they are mystified, but I can't worry about that, can't try to explain. I am going on a path of my own, a road they cannot take. I'll be alone, a separate person, even if, physically, I remain as close to them as ever. I'll take food from their hands, depend on them, live with them in love and harmony, but I will remain incomprehensible. Perhaps I will indulge them and let them think they understand, but they never will.
>
> … I have never felt more alone. I have never felt farther separated from my family. And in my whole life I have never loved them so much. (223-4)

By the end of the novel, Jean has come to understand her identity as a marginalized individual – i.e. a physically disabled young woman – based on her awareness of how her body is perceived and, more significantly, on her self-definition. Rather than presenting a clinical distinction between abled and disabled subjectivities, the narrative illustrates different *perspectives* on disability both as a perceived lived experience and as a constructed socio-cultural phenomenon. Consequently, Johnson sheds light on the institutionalized system of beliefs and attitudes that reinforce disability stigma rather than on the individuals, abled or disabled, who operate within that system and whose perceptions are necessarily limited by their awareness of that system.

The Intersections of Disability, Race, and Gender Representation in *Accidents of Nature*

With *Accidents of Nature*, Johnson represents characters with different types of disabilities, named or unnamed. When they first meet, Sara describes their cabinmates to Jean as "about the right mix – three wheelchairs, a one-leg amputee, two MRs[9], and two walkie-talkies[10]" (20). However, this heterogenous group of campers is not depicted as a collection of disability stereotypes for an abled reader's benefit. Instead, each camper's condition is grounded in nuanced individual experience, which is supported by the fact that a few characters even share the same condition but experience it differently. Campers Mary and Robert are both on the autism spectrum, for instance, but their behaviors differ: for one, Mary is mostly nonverbal while Robert exhibits verbal and behavioral tics. In another example of differing representation, Jean and Dolly both have CP, but display symptoms to different degrees: Dolly is less socially and physically independent than Jean, which results in her often being ignored or dismissed by other campers and staff while Jean's autonomy is less frequently challenged. These characters' physical and behavioral differences therefore also inform more implicit factors such as reactions and attitudes around them. Consequently, the array of disabled characters in this novel is not merely a central plot point, since the story takes place at a summer champ for disabled teenagers, but it also provides insight into the multiplicity of disability as a diverse, heterogenous experience, rather than the monolithic category it is too-often viewed as. As a result, the difference in treatment of characters with similar conditions but differing symptoms or levels of independence also reflects problematic hierarchies of desirability within the disability community itself.

In fact, the diversity offered by multiple disabled characters highlights other dynamics of power that interact with disabled identities, such as the intersection of race and ability, for example, which is not explored in the other texts in this selection (although other intersecting

---

[9] The abbreviation "MR" is used throughout the novel to refer to campers with cognitive disabilities ("mentally retarded"). The phrase is undeniably problematic and will only be used in this chapter when quoting the text, with the awareness that linguistic usage is informed by and reflects socio-historical context.

[10] Campers with who can walk and/or whose disabilities are invisible, allowing them to pass as "norms."

systems may be relevant in those texts, such as the economic privilege that Cece, August, or Martin benefit from, for example). This is brought to light is when Sara makes a direct comparison between racism and ableism: "It's like we're black or something, considering the amount of abuse and prejudice we get thrown at us" (*Accidents* 72). Although limited in its application, the comparison reveals that Sara understands the similarities between different systems of oppression, but the discussion does not go further. She later reiterates her point by telling Jean that "We come to accept the views of our oppressors. We think there's something wrong with ourselves. It's like black people thinking they need to change the way they talk, lose their culture, get more white. They're fooling themselves. They need to ask why they can't be black AND equal" (*Accidents* 110). Sara again makes a parallel between two distinct systems of oppression, ableism and racism, but does not interrogate their intersections further. This creates a potential gap in the narrative when it comes to the characters such as Denise and Margie, for instance, who are both Black *and* disabled.

The treatment of the latter, in fact, illustrates a complicated ideological stance. Margie, one of Jean's and Sara's cabinmates who has an intellectual disability, is depicted as a sweet-natured, shy, and helpful girl. She is very good at cleaning their cabin and helping other mobility-impaired campers and she is often praised for those qualities by her peers and counselors alike. Although she seemingly enjoys those responsibilities, to an extent, she is never really shown doing much else than helping others throughout the narrative. She has little agency and is often used by other characters who, although never outright abusing her, rarely take her own desires into account. Sara, for instance, enrolls Margie into her plan to make fun of the "Norms" during the talent show by simply giving her a task to accomplish. Although Margie is proud of her performance, she is never given a choice or asked for her opinion on the matter.

Depicting her as less functionally independent and even subservient to the other campers, reveals underlying hierarchies of power that significantly impact her social status and treatment, either because she is Black or because her disability is intellectual, but most likely because of the conflation of both these identities.

Only at the very end of the story does Jean briefly wonder about Margie's life outside of camp: "I don't know what kind of home she's going to. A regular family, or some other place, maybe someplace where they taught her how to push wheelchairs and make beds with hospital corners? She's never spoken of home. I've never asked" (219). Margie's lack of agency reflects subtle oppressive attitudes that place her at the bottom of almost every hierarchy of privilege: she is a young, Black girl with a cognitive disability in a camp where the majority of the other campers seems to be white and physically disabled. Jean's question, then, may be a first step towards her realization of her own attitudes towards these hierarchies. This suggests that, in order to truly understand her own social position, Jean needs to realize both how society marginalizes her disability and how it privileges her whiteness and (to a lesser extent) her intellectual abilities.

The camp dance provides some additional insight into Jean's exploration of the way disability and race intersect. When watching Denise and a white counselor dance together, for example, Jean remarks:

> My parents … say it's a sin to mix the races. I don't know. I guess I've never really needed to have an opinion: the only black people I've known until now, the people who work at my school, are married to each other. Now that I think about it, I guess mixing the races might not be a sin exactly, but it is asking for trouble. In most places, at least. Apparently here it's okay. (89)

Once again, the narrative establishes a parallel, albeit more implicitly this time, between oppression based on racial identity and oppression based on disability. Jean appears unsure whether to believe in racial segregation or to question it, an uncertain stance that seems to stem directly from her education. At this point in the narrative, she has not started to question her own identity as a disabled young woman explicitly, so she remains attached to the illusion of "normalcy" that she has been brought up to embody. In that regard, her views on segregation are similar, to a certain extent, to her views on disability: she believes in a system of norms that privilege white and abled bodies, but she is not yet questioning her own position as someone who simultaneously benefits from white privilege and is affected by ableism. As a result, this passage foreshadows a shift in her thinking: Jean admits that she has not been around many Black people, just like she has not met many disabled people, but now that her exposure to both groups has increased, she is becoming more willing to examine her beliefs and assumptions consciously and to be critical of the education she has received. Significantly, however, Camp Courage appears to be a space where "mixing the races [is] okay" unlike "most places" (89), which suggests that this social enclave may be particularly apt ground for Jean's exploration of her own positioning.

Furthermore, later during that same evening, Jean admires the Black counselors and walkie-talkies dancing to rhythm and blues music:

> "It's an African thing," Sara says knowingly. I don't need her to tell me that. The white people have left the floor.
>
> … The dance is serious business. Under her black hairnet, the old cook has a serious face. Her spotless white uniform seems to have ritual significance. The dance is cool,

> languid, almost stately in its dignity. At the same time, it is powerfully alive. It expresses unity, unity of movement, unity of purpose. … The line has become a living thing, a joining of individual bodies into one dancing mass, a kind of joining that does not depend on touch. (*Accidents* 98-9)

Witnessing this example of stepping prompts Sara to remark on the unity of the campers, cooks, counselors performing the dance, while Jean notices the moment when "the line breaks up and they are again individual people" (99). The unity and equality illustrated through the dance offer a highly symbolic counterpoint to the earlier dancing scene, thus modeling a relationship between the disabled campers and the abled staff in complete opposition to the oppressive dynamics previously shown. However, this idealized unity is shown to be restricted by the place that whiteness occupies in this social space, despite the diversity it also models in terms of ability. Margie once again struggles to conform to social expectations: Jean first comments that "Dancing in her faded yellow church dress, Margie radiates competence beyond question," before noting that "Arm in arm, Denise and Margie walk off the dance floor. Only when they have rejoined the white people does Margie change back. She stares at her feet. She is shy again" (100). Margie's varying degree of comfort within Black and white groups can be attributed to her implicit awareness of the way her racial identity intersects with her disabled identity, and which standards – those of whiteness or of ability – she needs to conform to in different contexts. When Jean wonders at Margie's dancing skills by asking "Where did she learn to dance like that?" (99), she may be becoming aware of this too. It is unclear whether she assumed Margie was less competent because of her race or because of her intellectual disability, or possibly a combination of both, but it makes it explicit to the reader that even in a space where everyone has different levels of ability and autonomy, being Black and disabled leads to specific social negotiations that Jean or Sara do not experience.

A second issue that is brought to light by the narrative and explored more fully is the intersection between disability, gender, and sex. A particularly telling example occurs during the dance organized by the campers and staff, where Jean notices counselors teasing campers in overtly sexual ways. She notices that "a girl counselor dances close to an MR man, rubbing her body against his as he jerks with the beat" (92), "a perky girl counselor has set herself on the lap of a CP guy [in a] torturous dance" (92), and "a male counselor is slow-dancing with the blind girl, [hoisting] her up by her buttocks and [wrapping] her legs around his hips" (93). When an uncomfortable Jean asks why the counselors are acting in such a degrading manner, Sara responds:

> "At times I think they don't know what they're doing. They think we're children, or puppies, or sexless beings from outer space. They don't realize that, whatever else is wrong with us, we all—even the quads and paras and the Butner people who've been sterilized—all of us are capable of being aroused. At other times, I think, They have to know! They have to know what they're doing. It's so obvious.
>
> So, then, maybe they do it for the same reason they do almost everything. They think we need it. It's therapy. Just another facet of the whole Camp Courage mission to provide freaks with 'normal experiences.' Now, I'm no judge of Normal, I know, but this don't look like Normal to me." She laughs a laugh that leaves me cold.
>
> So, then, there's a third possibility. Maybe—they like it. Maybe these Norm kids get their kicks from rubbing up against cripples, epileptics, MRs, aussies, and every kind

> of freak. They know they're in control; each contact reinforces their dominance, their perfect able-bodied superiority. It's the special thrill of laying hands on lepers. It's how they know they're divine. Teasing freaks might just be a turn-on they don't get anywhere else." (*Accidents* 93-4)

The scene set here is very visual and a few different perspectives are interwoven: the reader's, first, who observes those questionable interactions through Jean's descriptions; Jean's, who notices counselors and campers dancing and reacts with confusion and appalment; and Sara's dejected explanation. What had at first appeared "just like a normal dance," shifts when Jean notices that "something isn't right" (92). Something interrupts "visual business-as-usual" (Garland-Thomson 6) and makes Jean look twice, mirroring the way disability can disrupt normative expectations of physical appearance and behavior and begin to uncover ableist assumptions. Once she makes sense of what she is seeing, Jean's reaction is very telling. For the first time, her gaze is directed towards specific relationships between abled and disabled individuals that she identifies as (or believes to be) oppressive, regardless of her own positioning in this dichotomy. She does not center her own needs or bias here or align with the abled perspective as she did in previous occurrences, but instead focuses her attention on the abuses of power that she is witnessing. As a result, this passage clearly articulates the parallels between the counselors' privileged positions both as able-bodied and as sexually dominant. Additionally, those positions inform each other and, as a result, this intersectionality allows Jean (and readers by extension) to begin expanding her understanding of what ableist oppression entails on a socio-cultural level. By witnessing those warped interactions, Jean is forced to pay attention not only to the counselors' harmful sexual and emotional games, but most importantly to the fact that they are acting them out on the campers precisely because the latter are disabled.

It is also important to note that, because the reader is watching the scene unfold through Jean's eyes, we are only given access to her interpretation of it. What appears to her and Sara as a clear-cut example of oppression may be mitigated by bringing the disabled campers' agency into question. In this passage, we are lacking the latter's perspectives and can only interpret their reactions based on second-hand visual (but only textually descripted) cues. Consequently, although Jean's testimony and Sara's explanations seem credible and certainly critique important issues, the way the narrative constructs and relays this moment to the reader is also significant. At one point, for example, Willie is shown "dancing with a pretty girl" and, looking back at Jean and Sara, "winks a fish eye" (92) that complicates the idea assumption that all of these camper/counselors dynamics are necessarily abusive: Willie is clearly negotiating consent here, whereas other campers may not be afforded the same amount of power. The notion of agency is thereby complicated both by showing Jean's understanding of the dynamics playing out in front of her and by removing the reader from the direct visuality of the scene, potentially causing a dual reading of the passage.

Furthermore, these considerations later prompt Jean to reexamine her fantasies about her own future. While she has relied on conventional romantic tropes until that moment to project her life in a few years' time, she eventually realizes that she has "left [herself] out of [her] own fantasy" (152), instead preferring to imagine herself as an almost disembodied entity whose physical condition has no impact on her romantic or sexual life. She proceeds to reimagine her fantasy from a more self-aware position, where she now visualizes a potential husband pushing her wheelchair into a restaurant, translating her speech to the waitress, and helping her eat. She tries to imagine the intricacies of a physical relationship as well, with her body “trying to escape” (155) independently of her own will. Jean then realizes that her hopes of a “normal” future are in fact *normative*, meaning that they are built on desires imposed by an ableist society rather than based on her own needs and abilities. She further examines her own internalized ableism when she explains that

> For me, marrying someone like Willie would mean giving up the treasured place I’ve won in the normal world. I’ve never had a boyfriend, but I love going out with my crowd. Whenever we pile into a car to go to the movies or get burgers, I’m proud to be with a group of healthy, good-looking people. I feel like somebody. Maybe that’s petty and vain, maybe I’m kidding myself, but I’m not ready to give it up. I’m not ready to join the leper colony. I’m not ready to be half of a couple who turns people’s stomachs. (157)

Jean’s words violently contrast the “normal, healthy, good-looking people” and the “leper colony” which she evidently still distances herself from. However, the hyper-negative connotations of her phrasing suggest that she is not expressing of her true beliefs, but rather starting to realize how unfairly she is perceived by society at large. By rejecting the disabled community so harshly, Jean desperately attempts to cling to the illusion that she is “just like a normal girl” (15) but implicitly understands that she needs to come to terms with an identity and a future that fully embrace her disability.

Sara, on the other hand, chooses a different path: she “has already worked out her solution: be an old maid and die young. It’s a dignified, and achievable, solution” (157). By opting out of the normative system altogether, Sara makes her position ambivalent: she rejects expectations that do not take people like her into account, but also renounces any push for accommodation or social change in that regard.

Tellingly, both Jean and Sara's imagined futures revolve around traditional heterosexual expectations of romance and marriage (or, in Sara's case, the rejection thereof), which also highlights their condition as female characters. In the epilogue, Sara mentions that her love life is "rich and varied" (*Accidents* 228) because she loves food and TV, but that she remains "the same fussy old maid" (228). The narrative hints at the way disabled women's identities conflict with traditional heteronormative attitudes: as women, they are expected to desire marriage and relationships, but as disabled individuals, they are systematically excluded from those same romantic socio-cultural narratives. As a result, Sara's choice suggests that she is keenly aware of her intersecting identities and that, by rejecting the socio-culturally engrained idea that the absence of romantic relationships is a personal failing, she correctly understands it as a failure from the system.

The various characters depicted in *Accidents of Nature* embody the disabled experience in all its heterogeneity and complexity. Whether or not intersections with other identity markers are addressed directly or to their full extent, the narrative at least allows for those intersections to be recognized within identities characterized by multiple systems of oppression. Jean's awareness of her disability develops alongside her identity as a young woman: the questions she raises about her place in the world, her relationships, and her future are specific to her experience as a disabled teenage girl who has benefitted from relative economic and racial privilege. She also recognizes, importantly, that those questions must be negotiated on an individual level (as her questions about Sara's, Willie's, or Margie's different experiences indicate, for example) as well as on a larger social scale.

Significantly, other cognitively or behaviorally disabled characters assumed to be white are also routinely depicted as background figures who simply serve narrative purposes either by helping physically impaired characters or by advancing the plot. Autistic characters Robert and Mary, for instance, each experience an anxiety-induced meltdown at different points in the narrative. In one instance, Robert refuses to board a canoe and starts yelling at the counselors who are trying to help him into one. When Sara and Jean hear the commotion, they cheer for Robert in support of his act of resistance and Jean remarks:

> "He's like us," I say.
>
> I know, five minutes ago I'd have been insulted if someone suggested I had something in common with Robert. Now I know better. He's dropped his mask, a mask he's worn for at least eight years. Maybe he'll wait another eight years before dropping it again, if he ever does. But this one time has been enough. Enough to know: he's like us. (105-106)

Tellingly, however, immediately after the commotion is over, Jean comments that "the event is becoming a Camp Memory" and will soon be turned into "a Camp Story …, a beautiful story of a precious revelation, a marvel" (106). Through Jean's narration, Robert's outburst takes on a symbolical dimension that almost erases his individuality in favor of narrative advancement. Although centering the narrative on the protagonist's emotional and physical journey is a convention of first-person narratives, the story treats Robert, in this instance, more like a prop, or a catalyzer for Jean's own realizations, than a full-fledged character. Were this a one-time occurrence in the story, the implications of this passage may be less significant; however, a pattern emerges when we take into account the treatment of other characters such as Margie, as mentioned previously, or even Mary, another autistic camper who follows Sara's reverse telethon scheme without complaint but lashes out when the counselors forget to take her to the bathroom. In the instances when Jean remarks on those characters, her observations are friendly, but she seems to need to be actively paying attention to them in order for them to exist as more than part of the decor. Mary, for instance, is often mentioned in passages where Jean describes her daily routine: when the cabinmates wake up, eat, or shower, for example. But outside of those passive descriptions, Mary, Robert, and even Margie, to some extent, seem to fade into the background. Even when Jean interacts with them, she directs their exchanges inwards by reflecting on how she perceives them or what she can learn from them, such as a passage when Jean receives an award which she finds patronizing at first, until she states that Margie's unbridled enthusiasm when she wins her own award "has shown [her] how to be proud" (205).

In this regard, the characters of Margie, Mary, and Robert act as narrative prostheses for Jean, as she perceives mainly didactic value in their conditions rather than an opportunity to reflect on the intersections between her lived experience and theirs. Moreover, while Mitchell and Snyder's examination of disability as narrative prosthesis focuses on the use of disability merely as a plot point for abled characters (and readers), Jean's own position as a disabled character reveals the internalized ableism that leads her to adopt a view of disability through an abled lens. This further stigmatization of cognitive and emotional disabilities compared to physical disabilities highlights hierarchies of desirability (for lack of a better phrase) that create cognitively dissonant perceptions of disability by allowing individuals with more traditionally accepted disabilities (e.g. Jean) to benefit from more social privilege than others (e.g. Margie, Mary, and Robert). By "more traditionally accepted disabilities," I am referring to the idea that the closer a disabled person conforms to normative standards of appearance and behavior, the more likely they are to be represented, or even glamorized, in mainstream media. As a result, certain types of disability are socially privileged above others: manual wheelchair users, for example, are disproportionately represented in visual media, compared to people with facial differences or severe behavioral issues for instance (significantly, the most famous visual representation of disability, the International Symbol of Access, shows a stylized white figure in a manual wheelchair on a blue background). Consequently, these select types of disabilities are given disproportionate visibility and, when they act as stand-ins for larger disability representation, they convey a limited and homogeneous view of disabled people. Such portrayals often aim to ease the discomfort of abled audiences rather than depict accurate lived experience. In *Kids Like Us*, for example, the relative invisibility of Martin's condition (at least in terms of physical markers) lets him benefit from abled people's tacit acceptance into their social groups, until his behavior starts to stray too far away from their expectations. But in *Wonder,* the opposite happens: August's physical difference is so immediately, visibly outside of traditional norms that it leads to his preemptive rejection from social circles.

Jean, through her centering as the narrator who gazes at these other(ed) characters, at first seems to be positioned ambiguously: she is both distanced from ableist standards that she fails to meet, and in turn distances herself from people whose disabilities are less visible or accepted than hers. However, this position will prove unstable throughout the rest of the narrative. As Jean gradually gains a more nuanced understanding of disabled experiences, her self-awareness and self-agency come to reflect more critical perceptions of her own identity as well.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this dissertation has been to examine different ways in which visual representations of disability in children's literature construct the implied reader's gaze and enable narratives to reinforce or challenge existing ideologies of disability. The aim of such analysis was to assess when these underlying narrative mechanisms match the narrative's educational intent and when they fall short of this explicit goal. In many cases, although such texts overwhelmingly aim to encourage empathy with and acceptance of disabled individuals, they give little to no acknowledgement of disability oppression as a systematic socio-cultural phenomenon and therefore do not effectively question the power dynamics that enable such oppression, leading to those same power dynamics being implicitly reproduced and reinforced by the texts in question. Such a mismatch between intent and impact often reveals the flaws of surface-level representations that privilege the comfort of an abled audience over actual disability liberation.

In closing, several observations can be made about the selected literary texts analyzed in this dissertation. First, although visibility does not only encompass visual elements (such as illustrations or phonetically transcribed text), visual devices are often used to convey a particular physical or sensory experience of disability to the reader. As such, visual devices are often used as stand-ins for another sense (e.g. hearing in *El Deafo*) or symptom (e.g. stuttering in *A Boy and a Jaguar*). These substituted transcriptions of disabled experiences tend to emphasize emotional or intellectual impact by demanding a particular kind of attention and effort from the reader in order to decipher those visual clues, while at the same time bypassing the deeply physical embodiment of those conditions at least to a certain extent. Indeed, replacing hearing impairment with visual depictions of empty speech bubbles or phonetic text, for example, seems to equate two very different kinds of sensory impairments and therefore frames Cece's condition as a sensory loss comparable to that of the reader's difficulty to read partial speech bubbles, which minimizes her experience as a deaf person. On the other hand, and on a more "meta" level, the very format of Cece's narrative as a graphic novel emphasizes her reliance on visual means of communication and expression, which is then replicated by the reader *only* relying on written text and illustrations. As a result, the way visuality is used to depict disability cannot be qualified either as entirely positive, or entirely negative. Rather, this ambivalence underlines complex interactions between abled and disabled individuals, and creates a network of negotiations between an individual's embodied experiences and their environment – or, as Shakespeare calls it, an interactional model of disability. Rather than undermining our main argument, though, the fact that those texts cannot be read as entirely positive or negative representations of disability only highlights the intricacy of navigating the world as a disabled person.

Furthermore, visuality also implies a perspective, a point of view that is adopted or examined by the reader. In that sense, analyzing how a reader's viewpoint is constructed by a given narrative offers insight into the ideological mechanisms that underlie that narrative. Through this narrative positioning, socio-cultural identities are dissected, brought together, or divided into categories, modeling dynamics of power that reflect or challenge those that exist in "real life," of which fiction is but an extension rather than an opposition.

When the reader is placed as an observer of disability, the narrative models a one-sided abled gaze that most often posits an abled reader and objectifies disabled subjectivities as subject to their gaze. Disrupting this one-sided abled gaze requires, first and foremost, an acknowledgement of this underlying dynamic, both in real life and in narratives. Then, in the case of fictional texts, it also becomes necessary to diversify the perspectives offered by those narratives to include new, productive ways not just to *represent*, but also to *see*, disability. What Cece Bell attempts to do in *El Deafo* or what Harriet McBryde Johnson models in *Accidents of Nature*, for instance, provide examples that go against stigmatizing narrative dynamics.

Another significant observation that can be made about these representations is an author's choice to represent conditions that are either visible, partially visible, or invisible through either visual or non-visual means. The implications of a graphic novel about an invisible disability or a non-illustrated novel about a visible condition, for example, are different. In each possible combination, choices are made to *show* or *hide* different aspects of that disability visually and/or textually that inform the reader's perception of a character and, by extension, understanding of their disability. For instance, *Wonder*'s almost total absence of physicality is as revealing about the construction of August's condition as is Martin's emphasis on his inner monologue in *Kids Like Us*, Cece's illustrated hypervisibility in *El Deafo,* or Alan's mix of fragmented speech and emotional imagery in *A Boy and a Jaguar*. Examining the interactions between text and pictures informs not only how those different disabilities are meant to be perceived by readers. In a broader sense, it can also reveal the socio-cultural attitudes that deem certain parts of the disabled experience "worthy" of being shown directly or, on the contrary, minimized or hidden. The most obvious example of this idea is probably the fact that, although Palacio's novel attempts to challenge the prejudice faced by August, it also fails to acknowledge its own part in hiding August's body and thus perhaps reinforcing that same prejudice.

But, if analyzing selected examples of children's literature allows us to understand the deeper, complex mechanisms that underlie these specific texts, it also encourages a bigger picture to emerge and reveal larger trends about disability representation. In this case, those patterns helped us identify some of the shortcomings in the representation of disabled characters through visual devices. However, these critical readings do not aim to examine only the problems in disability representation raised by these texts, but also to highlight the potential models of representation they enable, or at least point to.

Wonder exemplifies some of the most problematic ways to represent disability visually through August Pullman's portrayal in the original novel, the film and picturebook adaptations, and the "Choose Kind" campaign that followed the book's success. Each media brings out a different facet of August's visuality and highlights flaws in his various depictions, but the main issue that undermines the *Wonder* franchise as a whole is its reliance on a very binary and one-sided perspective on disability. August may be a disabled character, but he is constructed *by* and *for* an abled gaze and as a result, rather than modeling the inclusion that the text explicitly promotes, this narrative stance works against a truly egalitarian conception of disability.

Examining the levels of narration in *El Deafo* offers a potential rebuttal to *Wonder*'s heavily binary conception of disability. The intersecting subjectivities at play in graphic novels allow for a representation and visualization of disability that encourage narrative empathy through the reader's fluid positioning in time rather than space, i.e. in the child protagonist's imagined present or the adult narrator's real present.

Building on this argument, the three picturebooks we examined also offer visual depictions of their disabled characters through an adult perspective, with the added complication of representing invisible disabilities. The overlapping child and adult subjectivities create a narrative ambivalence that is conducive both to the disruption of binary conceptions of (dis)ability and to an empathetical reading of those texts.

The narrative positioning in *Kids Like Us* more strongly encourages this type of empathetic reading and does not rely on a sharp abled/disabled or even neurotypical/neurodivergent binary. Instead, Martin's autism is represented purely through textual embodiment, a sort of narrative window into Martin's experience that is reminiscent of *Wonder*'s attempt to bypass physical representation. However, because of August's and Martin's respective conditions, the significance of this lack of illustrations has radically different implications in each narrative. *Kids Like Us* thereby highlights a more productive and nuanced use of this type of representation through written text, where form and content work together rather than against each other.

Finally, *Accidents of Nature* offers perhaps the most nuanced and fluid representation(s) of disability, both as an individual experience and as a social marker. Although highly didactic in nature, the narrative explores ways to challenge binary and oppressive representations of disabled characters in fiction that could be applied to other stories and media. Johnson's novel highlights the fragmented nature of individual disabled experiences, strongly echoing Shakespeare's definition of an interactional model of disability and Dolmage's view of disability as a generative *mêtis* to challenge the ableist status quo.

On the one hand, one could argue that acknowledging the situational aspect of disability can muddle the very definition, and therefore representation, of disability. However, on the other hand, by arguing against an essentialist view of disabled people as a monolithic social group, it becomes easier to offer more nuanced and diverse representations of disabled experiences and to avoid stereotypes both in depictions of disabled people and in narrative positionings. Acknowledgement of this fragmentation and situationality, rather than a limitation to the representation of disability as a systemic phenomenon, is therefore a necessity.

WORKS CITED

Alaniz, Jose. *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond.* University Press of Mississippi, 2015.

Aldinger, Joseph M. M. "Narratives of Overcoming: Disability Theory and The Crash Reel." Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory, vol. 15, no. 2, 2016, pp. 85-97.

"Autistically Reading – Kids Like Us (Hilary Reyl)." *A Blank Page*, 20 Jan. 2019, ablankpage.org/autistically-reading-kids-like-us-hilary-reyl/.

Baker, Deirdre. "Cece Bell on El Deafo." *The Horn Book*, 12 Nov. 2014, www.hbook.com/?detailStory=cece-bell-el-deafo.

---. "Review of El Deafo." *The Horn Book*, 12 Nov. 2014, www.hbook.com/?detailStory=review-el-deafo.

Beechler, Bill. "Superheroes in a Silent World: Hawkeye and El Deafo." *The Image of Disability: Essays on Media Representations*, by J. L. Schatz and Amber E. George, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018, pp. 44–60.

Bell, Cece. *El Deafo*. Amulet Books, 2014.

Bradshaw, Peter. "Wonder Review – Manipulative Feelgood Drama Comes with Hefty Dollop of Treacle." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 12 Nov. 2017, www.theguardian.com/film/2017/nov/12/wonder-review-owen-wilson-julia-roberts.

Brittain, Isabel. "An Examination into the Portrayal of Deaf Characters and Deaf Issues in Picture Books for Children." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2004, doi:10.18061/dsq.v24i1.841.

Brown, Jennifer M. “Children's Bookshelf Talks with Harriet McBryde Johnson.” *PublishersWeekly.com*, 20 Apr. 2006, www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/11729-children-s-bookshelf-talks-with-harriet-mcbryde-johnson.html.

Brown, Margaret Wise, and Leonard Weisgard. *The Little Island*. Garden City, NY, 1946.

Brown, Megan R. “‘Swimming Against the Tide’: Disability Represented Through Fish Symbolism in (and on) Middle Grade and Young Adult Novels.” *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2017, pp. 193–209., doi:10.1007/s10583-017-9335-5.

Brune, Jeffrey A., and Daniel J. Wilson. *Disability and Passing: Blurring the Lines of Identity*. Temple University Press, 2013.

Cage, Eilidh, and Zoe Troxell-Whitman. “Understanding the Reasons, Contexts and Costs of Camouflaging for Autistic Adults.” *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, vol. 49, no. 5, 2019, pp. 1899–1911., doi:10.1007/s10803-018-03878-x.

Chbosky, Stephen, director. *Wonder*. Lionsgate, 2017.

“Choose Kind.” *Wonder*, wonderthebook.com/choose-kind.

Day, Sara K. *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature*. University Press of Mississippi, 2013.

“Disability Impacts All of Us Infographic.” *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 16 Sept. 2020, www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html

Dolmage, Jay. *Disability Rhetoric*. Syracuse University Press, 2016.

--- “Metis, *Mêtis*, Mestiza, Medusa: Rhetorical Bodies across Rhetorical Traditions.” *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1–28, doi:10.1080/07350190802540690.

Drews, C.G. *Paper Fury*, “Kids Like Us By Hilary Reyl || Autism, French Food, And Bookworms…Wow I’m In Love,” 23 Oct. 2017, paperfury.com/kids-like-us-hilary-reyl-review/.

Dunn, Patricia A. *Disabling Characters: Representations of Disability in Young Adult Literature.* Peter Lang, 2015.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. “Seeing the Disabled: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography.” *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, by Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, New York University Press, 2001, pp 335-374.

--- *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

Goodley, Dan. *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*. Sage Publications, 2017.

Gervay, Susanne. “*Butterflies*: Youth Literature as a Powerful Tool in Understanding Disability.” *Disability Studies Quarterly,* vol. 24, no. 1, 2004, DOI:10.18061/dsq.v24i1.844.

Gubar, Marah. “The Hermeneutics of Recuperation: What a Kinship-Model Approach to Children’s Agency Could Do for Children’s Literature and Childhood Studies.” *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2016, pp. 291-310. Doi:10.1353/jeu.2016.0015

“Harriet McBryde Johnson.” *The Simon Foundation*, simonfoundation.org/harriet-mcbryde-johnson/.

Henley, Ariel. “How the Film ‘Wonder’ Is Commercializing Facial Difference || ROOTED IN RIGHTS.” *Ariel Henley*, Ariel Henley, 20 Sept. 2017, www.arielhenley.com/home/2017/9/20/how-the-film-wonder-is-commercializing-facial-difference.

--- “Why We Need to Stop Calling ‘Wonder’ an ‘Inspiring Tear-Jerker.’” *Teen Vogue*, Teen Vogue, 9 Aug. 2017, www.teenvogue.com/story/wonder-wrong-disfigurement-and-craniofacial-disorders.

--- “'Wonder' Is a 'Feel-Good' Movie That Needed More Realism.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 21 Dec. 2017, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/12/wonder-is-a-feel-good-movie-that-needed-more-realism/548828.

“How One Unkind Moment Gave Way to ‘Wonder’.” NPR, 12 Sept. 2013, www.npr.org/2013/09/12/221005752/how-one-unkind-moment-gave-way-to-wonder.

Johnson, Harriet McBryde. *Accidents of Nature*. Henry Holt and Co, 2006.

---. “Unspeakable Conversations.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 16 Feb. 2003, www.nytimes.com/2003/02/16/magazine/unspeakable-conversations.html.

Keen, Suzanne. “A Theory of Narrative Empathy.” *Narrative*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2006, pp. 207–236., doi:10.1353/nar.2006.0015.

---. *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

---. “Fast Tracks to Narrative Empathy: Anthropomorphism and Dehumanization in Graphic Narratives.” *SubStance*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2011, pp. 135–155., doi:10.1353/sub.2011.0003.

---. “Life Writing and the Empathetic Circle.” *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2016, pp. 9-26, doi:10.6240/concentric.lit.2016.42.2.02

Kersten, Sara. “‘We Are Just as Confused and Lost as She Is’: The Primacy of the Graphic Novel Form in Exploring Conversations Around Deafness.” *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2017, pp. 282–301., doi:10.1007/s10583-017-9323-9.

Kersten-Parrish, Sara. “Students’ Conceptions of Deafness While Reading *El Deafo*.” *English Journal*, vol.108, no. 6, 2019, pp. 39-47.

Kidd, Chip. *Go: a Kidd's Guide to Graphic Design*. Workman Publishing Company, Inc., 2013.

Klein, Allison. "'I'm More Awesomer': How Kids with Facial Differences Are Reacting to the Movie 'Wonder'." *The Washington Post,* WP Company, 17 Nov. 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2017/11/17/im-more-awesomer-how-kids-with-facial-differences-are-reacting-to-the-movie-wonder/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6bcf771e53b8.

Lewis, David. *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks: Picturing Text*. Taylor and Francis, 2012.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.* Harper Perennial, 1994.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. University of Michigan Press, 2008.

Moody, Mike. "Review: Wonder by R.J. Palacio." *Disability in Kidlit*, 19 Jan. 2018, disabilityinkidlit.com/2018/01/19/review-wonder-by-r-j-palacio.

Nel, Philip. "Same Genus, Different Species?: Comics and Picture Books." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 37 no. 4, 2012, pp. 445-453.

Nikolajeva, Maria. "Beyond the Grammar of Story, or How Can Children's Literature Criticism Benefit from Narrative Theory?" *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2003, pp. 5-16.

Nodelman, Perry. *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature.* Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.

---. "The Eye and the I: Identification and First-Person Narratives in Picture Books." *Children's Literature* 19.1 (1991): 1-30., doi:10.1353/chl.0.0494.

---. *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books.* University of Georgia Press, 1988.

Noreau, Luc, and Kathryn Boschen. “Intersection of Participation and Environmental Factors: A Complex Interactive Process.” *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*, vol. 91, no. 9, 2010, doi:10.1016/j.apmr.2009.10.037.

Oliver, Michael. *Social Work With Disabled People.* 4th ed., Palgrave MacMillan, 2012.

Palacio, R. J. *Wonder*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2017.

--- *We’re All Wonders*. Puffin, 2017.

Parrott, Kiera. “SLJ Chats with Cece Bell About Her Graphic Novel Memoir 'El Deafo': Up Close.” *School Library Journal*, 9 Dec. 2014, www.slj.com/?detailStory=slj-chats-with-cece-bell-about-her-graphic-novel-memoir-el-deafo-up-close.

Polacco, Patricia. *Thank You, Mr. Falker*. Philomel Book, 1998.

Pollard, Scott. “Introduction: The Art of Our Art, the Quirkiness of Our Forms.” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 263-266, doi:10.1353/chq.2013.0032.

Rabinowitz, Alan, and Cátia Chien. *A Boy and a Jaguar*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014.

Reyl, Hilary. “Proust, Love and Autism.” *Frog & Ted*, 23 May 2018, frogandted.wordpress.com/2018/05/23/kids-like-us/.

---. “Hilary Reyl: Straining Toward The Other (Autism, YA).” *A Novel Mind*, A Novel Mind, Feb. 2012, www.anovelmind.com/post/hilary-reyl-straining-toward-the-other.

---. *Kids Like Us.* Faber and Faber, 2018.

Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies*. Sage Publications, 2016.

Saunders, Kathy. “What Disability Studies Can Do for Children's Literature.” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2004, doi:10.18061/dsq.v24i1.849.

Savarese, Ralph. “From Neurodiversity to Neurocosmopolitanism: Beyond Mere Acceptance and Inclusion.” *Ethics and Neurodiversity*, by C. D. Herrera and Alexandra Perry, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, pp. 191–205.

Schalk, Sami. “Reevaluating the Supercrip.” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2016, pp. 71–86., doi:10.3828/jlcds.2016.5.

Shakespeare, Tom. *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2014.

---. “Harriet McBryde Johnson (1957-2008).” *Disabled Lives*, 19 Nov. 2013, disabledlives.blogspot.com/2013/11/harriet-mcbryde-johnson-1957-2008.html.

Shakespeare, Tom and Nick Watson. “The Social Model of Disability: An Outdated Ideology?” *Research in Social Science and Disability*, vol.2., 2002, pp 9-28.

Sinclair, James. “The Top 3 Books with Autistic Characters: 2017.” *Autistic & Unapologetic*, 30 Dec. 2017, autisticandunapologetic.com/2017/12/30/the-top-books-with-autistic-lead-characters-2017/.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed., University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Smith-D’Arezzo, Wendy, and Janine Holc. “Reframing Disability through Graphic Novels for Girls: Alternative Bodies in Cece Bell’s *El Deafo*.” *Girlhood Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2016.

Stevenson, Deborah. “*Wonder* (Review).” *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, vol. 65, no. 7, 2012, pp. 366–367., doi:10.1353/bcc.2012.0198.

Tyner, Madeline. “The Numbers Are In: 2019 CCBC Diversity Statistics.” *Cooperative Children's Book Center*, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 16 June 2020, ccblogc.blogspot.com/2020/06/the-numbers-are-in-2019-ccbc-diversity.html.

Walker, Nick. “Neuro-What?” *Neurocosmopolitanism*, 26 July 2013, neurocosmopolitanism.com/neuro-what/.

Wasser, Chris. “Wonder Review: 'I Sobbed My Heart out. A Lovely Little Film'.” *Independent.ie*, Independent.ie, 1 Dec. 2017, www.independent.ie/entertainment/movies/movie-reviews/wonder-review-i-sobbed-my-heart-out-a-lovely-little-film-36369568.html.

Wheeler, Elizabeth A. “No Monsters in This Fairy Tale: Wonder and the New Children’s Literature.” *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2013, pp. 335–350., doi:10.1353/chq.2013.0044.

Whitlock, Gillian. *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Wood, Douglas, and Jim Burke. *Miss Little's Gift*. Candlewick Press, 2009.

Wyile, Andrea Schwenke. “The Value of Singularity in First- and Restricted Third-Person Engaging Narration.” *Children's Literature*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2003, pp. 116–141.

Yergeau, Melanie, and Bryce Huebner. “Minding Theory of Mind.” *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2017, pp. 273–296., doi:10.1111/josp.12191.