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**Disability and the Young Adult Reader: How Has the Portrayal of Disability Changed in
the Last Fifty Years?**

A Thesis Presented

by

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Abstract of the Thesis

Disability and the Young Adult Reader: How Has the Portrayal of Disability Changed in the Last Fifty Years?

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Literature offers an opportunity to share in the lived experiences of others, experiences that as readers we may otherwise never personally encounter. Disability in our society is a reality, yet one that has not been fully embraced—not unlike issues with race, gender, age, or sexual orientation. Individuals begin to encounter many of these matters early in life, but as impressionable adolescents, a time when they begin to understand and navigate the world, often times they meet these experiences in books. Since books are an especially important part of how thoughts and attitudes are shaped, this paper seeks to analyze a selection of texts geared towards young readers to understand whether the view of disability has remained static since the 1950s and to understand how disability is being used in more current texts for young adult readers. *Stoner & Spaz* by Ron Koertge, *Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick and *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes will be the representative artifacts for this analysis. How these texts respond to important questions about language, representations of disability, the lived experiences of people with disabilities, and the power differentials which exist will be examined.

Dedication Page

Dedicated to my mother, Shirley T. Munroe, whose love and encouragement is beyond measure, in memory of my beloved sister, Karen C. Munroe, my amazing, beautiful children, Andrew S. Hinkson, Lauren C. Hinkson and Nigel M. Hinkson.

Also, thank you Allen for making it possible for me to move in a new direction.

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The presence of disabled characters in literature is an undeniable fact. The appearance of disabled characters in literature date back to classics like Homer's *Polyphemus*, William Shakespeare's *Richard III*, and others like Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, D. H. Lawrence's *Clifford Chatterley*, Harper Lee's *Boo Radley*, and Toni Morrison's *Eva Peace*. Even beyond the classics, we note that there are references in scripture about the disabled. The verbiage in many holy texts suggest that disability is intended to be an accepted fact of human nature as opposed to an abnormal, freakish consequence of the human condition. For example, in the book of *Exodus* written by Moses, he writes, "Then the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (NAS, Ex. 4:11) Disabled characters are still found in today's literature, but clearly a shift in how these characters are portrayed is evident as compared to a short fifty years ago. In so doing, the discourse today about disability is perhaps changing the way in which disabled characters are portrayed in today's young adult novels. This is important since how the youth of today think about disability will impact the way in which our future society constructs disability, the laws which are written regarding them and certainly the literature which they may be a part.

As was mentioned, disabled characters are not a new phenomenon in literature; in fact, many authors of some of our most classic texts have been influenced by their own disabilities in their writing. Whether we accept it or not, disability is central to the human experience simply because we, in the so-called able-bodied world, may one day find ourselves disabled. Sharon Snyder reiterates this point in her book *Disabilities Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, regarding disability and its impact. She states, "Disability as both a bodily condition and a social category either now or later will touch us all" (Snyder et. al 2). This paper examines three texts and their intersections with disability. *Stoner & Spaz* by Ron Koertge (2002), *Freak the Mighty* by

Rodman Philbrick (1993) and the classic, *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes will be the representative novels for examination. As will be discussed, there are, however, notable differences in the older classic *Flowers for Algernon* as opposed to the more contemporary novels, *Freak the Mighty* and *Stoner & Spaz*. In all three texts for examination, the narration is executed in the first person, all three are told from the perspective of a person with a disability and all three counter the old tropes of persons with a disability as pitiable, asexual, isolated and incapable of fully participating in everyday life. These characters are not secondary or second fiddle characters who exist only as a medium for allowing the non-disabled protagonist to become a better person; their voices are distinctive in the narrative rather than silent, and they assume a powerful presence even while there are moments when they are dismissed, ridiculed and/or subjected to rude behavior.

Literature has the power to impact the thinking and attitudes of its readers. It also offers an opportunity to share in the lived experiences of those we may never have the opportunity to encounter in our daily lives. There are countless discourses that document the experiences of children and adults as it relates to race, gender, and sexuality, but disability culture is an area that is only recently beginning to receive greater attention. In this paper I will analyze how disability is portrayed in selected novels. It is necessary, however, to first look back at how disability has become a more *visible* issue today. There are many factors which contribute to this outcome but I will concentrate on what I believe are two very important media sensations which impacted the public view of disability. A brief look at the law and its affect on the disabled community is then discussed. How writers over the last fifty to sixty years have portrayed disabled characters follows and finally how the Society of Disabilities Studies (SDS) supports the transformation in attitude toward the disabled community.

Not unlike other civil rights fighters, the disabled community has fought to be an active and visible part in the community, entitled to the same rights as other groups who have been pushed to the margins of society. It is incumbent upon us who are presently able-bodied to ensure that the rights and concerns of the disabled are upheld and advanced since there is a strong probability that disability could one day be will be a fact of all our lives. Disability is generally defined as a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities. The disabled, or rather the differently-abled, a reference some in the disabled community prefer, are not regarded in the same manner as those who have been *normalized* because they have no restrictions in their ability to function in our present world without accommodations. James Charlton, writer of “*Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability, Oppression and Empowerment,*” and others remind us of the importance of the necessary alliance between “presently-abled” and the “disabled” community. Historically, those in the disabled community are left “outside” the discourse regarding what is best for them and what they need. In order to truly understand the lived experiences of the disabled, those who are living the experience must be a part of the conversation. In effect, we all benefit when the “presently-abled” advocate for and work alongside the disability community both socially, politically and beyond. In life as in literature, disabled characters who have existed in the margins of society may now find a place, perhaps not in the center of society or literature, but much closer to the center than fifty years ago.

According to the World Health Organization, “...approximately 10% of the global population has a disability” (ctd. in Landrum 257). It is important for this population to see themselves represented in all facets of life, media, television and print. Over the last 20 years, publishers around the world have recognized the need to represent the differently-abled

community in a wide range of literature. Studies of Young Adult literature by scholar Jen Scott Curwood, cites Koss & Teal, indicating that, "...in the United States, 25% of young adult literature includes a character with a disability." Likewise, Wendy M. Smith-D'Arezzo in her article, "Diversity in Children's Literature: Not just a Black and White Issue" notes that "...more than 10% of the school population in the United States is currently identified as having a disability that significantly affects the child's ability to perform in the classroom" (75). These empirical findings suggest that careful critical analysis of how disabled characters are portrayed is an important undertaking since we know that people are impacted by what they read, particularly so the young reader, and eventually, our society as a whole. According to Jen Scott Curwood, "Young adult literature can be a way to both read the world and read the word" and how young adult readers read the world is worth investigating (Curwood16).

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, known as the ADA, is a landmark piece of legislation which mandates civil rights for people with disabilities. It notes that disability encompasses "physical, sensory, and mental impairments"; illnesses, "congenital and acquired differences thought of as disfigurements or deformities", "psychological disabilities"; "stamina limitations due to disease or its treatment"; "developmental differences, and visible anomalies such as birthmarks, scarring, and the marks of aging" (ADA.gov). Legislation is foundational to ensuring people's rights, but better care, treatment, support, understanding and attitudes toward the disabled community is a responsibility we all have. With legislation in place, it forms a good foundation on which to build a new attitude toward disability. However, legislation alone does not transform attitudes but perhaps through interpersonal contacts, media and literature attitudes may begin to change.

Visible Disability

Some fifty to sixty years ago, disability became visible to the public eye as never before via mass communication, i.e. television and advertising. However, this visibility came at a time, particularly in the United States, when the “discourse of disability” or the language associated with disability had serious negative connotations. Ellen Barton points out that the discourse of disability refers to disability as a complex social construction, “...one which reflects not a benign evolution of acceptance but a dynamic set of representations that are deeply embedded in historical and cultural contexts...and these representations are in part created and reflected in ...stretches of language as short as a conversational exchange or as long as the literature of an academic discipline” (Barton 169). Terms like “retard,” “cripple,” “handicapped,” and “spastic” were commonplace in the language years ago more so than they are today. Barton also notes that language is not the only contributor to the social construction of disability but that “other interacting discourses—medical, legal, educational and charitable—add to this social construction of disability” (Barton 170).

In examining the texts and language regarding disability, it is necessary to look at how charitable organizations contributed to the social construction of disability since they played an integral part in promoting stereotypes of disability which persist in American culture today. Charitable organizations interacted with the public primarily in the framework of advertising and much of the discourse exploited fear of disability and pity for its victims under the banner of fund-raising. In the early 1950s charitable organizations had been a prominent way for the general public to interact with the disabled community; in fact, according to Ellen Barton, they have played a “crucial role in establishing cultural understandings of disability in America”

(Barton 169). However, in as much as these organizations were extremely successful in providing financial support to the disabled community, they were also complicit in robbing them of normalcy. Clearly, with the advent of television, disability has become a common and widespread normative visual today and not the aberrant sight that was hidden away from public view in years gone by.

The discourse on charitable organizations like United Way, United Cerebral Palsy Association and the Epilepsy Foundations, just to name a few, made their mark in society beginning in the late 1940s until the early 1960s. Their ads and pleas for contributions for “effective treatment and cure” came at a time when the social climate was particularly receptive and responsive to their campaigns. In what David Halberstram calls the “era of abundance,” the United States was languishing in the post war era, life was good, affluence was expanding, and American business was booming (ctd. in Barton 172). Though there were some lukewarm fears about McCarthyism, the cold war and Third World fears at that time, nothing struck more fear into American lives than the threat of Polio. Ellen Barton quotes Kathryn Black noting that:

Into this buoyant postwar era came a fearsome disease to haunt lives.... Polio was a crack in the fantasy....Polio created an epidemic of fear unlike any other in modern times....The disease attacked everyone’s sense of fairness and muddies [everyone’s] notion of justice....The disease stood as an ominous reminder that Americans were still vulnerable to the forces of nature, that scientists couldn’t put everything right (Black 47-48).

Two prominent television programs which allowed the general public to “see” disability were the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) Labor Day Telethons dating back to the 1950s and the 1972 Willowbrook State School exposé by Geraldo Rivera. These two

programs brought to the public eye, views of disability which are arguably positive, visible and informative and at the same time negative, demeaning and pitiable.

Famous comedian and film star, Jerry Lewis, spearheaded fundraising events for MDA dating back to the 1950's when he held Thanksgiving Day parties to raise funds for the organization's New York City area operations. Then, beginning in 1966, he hosted the annual Labor Day weekend telethon broadcast until 2010. From its inception to 2009, the program raised \$2.45 billion for MDA. There would hardly be an argument that the telethons were successful in funding the cause for MDA; however, the show featured primarily young disabled children who were displayed on the stages as a means of raising money for the organization. Jerry Lewis was relentless in his dedication to this project perhaps because when he was only two years old he developed a potentially crippling disease, but with the loving care of his grandmother, fought against the disease. Lewis rarely ever spoke of this event in his life but claims it to be true.

While the Lewis program made disability visible, and to a degree normalized the presence of disabled figures, those in the disabled community contend that the view of disability was skewed as a condition affecting only children and often times evoking pity for the *poor unfortunate* children. Barton's article, "Textual Practices of Erasure: Representations of Disability and the Founding of the United Way" argues that "charity fund-raising constructs a simplistic stereotypical representation of disability primarily by erasing the complex experience of individuals, particularly adults, with disabilities" (Barton 172). There is certainly the argument that without being visible, it is difficult to address what could be considered a global issue. It seems it is only then that as a society, we can begin to unpack and deal with the many

aspects of the subject and in many cases the negative and ugly side that is disregarded is swept under the rug because human nature tends to fear and avoid what they do not understand.

The negative and ugly side of the State's unwillingness to take seriously the lives, rights and health of the community was no more visible than when investigative reporter for WABC-TV in New York, Heraldo Rivera, in 1972, conducted a series of investigations at Willowbrook State School located in Staten Island, New York. This facility housed and cared for disabled individuals and was the largest state-run institution for people with mental disabilities in the United States. It had been designed to house only 4,000 residents but by 1965 the population had grown to 6,000. Consequently, this overcrowding led to inadequate care, unsanitary conditions, abuses both sexual and physical and the safety of the residents was compromised. The exposé brought national attention to disability and the disabled community. As horribly visible as it was, there was a public outcry which ultimately led to the school's closing in 1987 and to federal civil rights legislation for the protection of the disabled (Willowbrook, 1972).

The Law and Disability

Legislation plays an important role in how we view disability today and as previously mentioned, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) mandate civil rights for people with disabilities. The disability narrative was not only evident in legislation, advertisements and television media but literature also played a part in perpetuating a negative view of the disabled. Of course, it could be argued that literature is only a reflection of society but if we accept that the written word is powerful then it stands to reason that literature has the power to impact society as well.

The ADA of 1990 was preceded by other legislation that, in effect, promoted a negative view of disability rather than a positive support system. The notion of hiding disability from public view is well documented in US history. People with disabilities were subjected to the “Ugly Laws,” a law which existed on the books beginning in the late 1860s stating that people with visible impairments were not to be seen in public. It was not until the 1970s that this law was ultimately repealed. The intended goal of these laws was to “preserve the quality of life” for the community (Thompson 2011). Today, although persons with disabilities are not hidden from sight and subjected to living in squalor, as was discovered at the Willowbrook State Institution and others like it in the early 1970s, there is still some concern today about the kind of care and support they receive.

A Historical Perspective of Writers and Disabled Characters

If literature is an imitation of real life then it raises the question: How was disability portrayed in texts fifty years ago as opposed to today, and particularly how are those images projected to young adult readers? *Flowers for Algernon*, written some fifty years ago, falls under the category of classics and represents a rather complex treatment of disability. This novel features a mentally disabled man who is the central character in the story. He is gainfully employed and not seemingly hidden from society but clearly is separated from his social group because of his disability. Although this is the case for this story’s main character, it had not been the reality for the mentally challenged in our contemporary society. Frances Gates Rhodes notes that, “Historically, the treatment of the cognitively disabled has not always been either humane or fair. No accommodations were available in the school setting, for example, ergo cognitively disabled people rarely attended more than, at the most, a very few years of school. Frequently,

unemployable, an institutionalized individual might remain chained – much like an animal” (Rhodes 49). In a society where fear, lack of understanding and compassion often prevails, treatment of the disabled does not escape being handled like other marginalized people—disregarded, disrespected and dismissed.

Books are an especially important part of how thoughts and attitudes are shaped, but it is particularly true for younger readers whose minds are more impressionable. Though the central characters of the selected texts have voice, agency and power, they are still worth examining in terms of language, representation of disability and the lived experiences of disability.

For younger readers books featuring disabled children, like *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, were not commonplace texts produced in the early 1800’s to the early 1900’s. Writers of that time did, however, write books about children who were ill or blind or even children who were unable to walk. But, they did not attempt to depict the real life of a child with a disability. Writers in this time period were more focused on being didactic within a “framework of warm and affectionate family stories” where young readers learned lessons about how to “overcome selfishness or a too strong-will, and how to conform to traditional roles and gender expectations” (Keith 1). Many of these stories used disability as a metaphor for the purpose of transcending a period of despair to the conclusion of a piece where there is a predictable happy ending. The focus of writers was less on the reality of a life with a disability and more about disability as a vehicle for transformation to “goodness” or a “normal” able-bodied life. Although this was their focus, they were, however, unknowingly complicit in perpetuating a view of people with impairments as pitiable, suggesting that a life with a disability was not worth living. They also establish and perpetuate the binary distinction between the able-bodied and the disabled—the rhetoric of “them” and “us.”

Disabled characters in books published before World War I tended to convey two-dimensional stereotypes—the villain or saintly invalids. Children’s books featuring villain types were in books intended more for adults and the villain types also appeared in fantasies like J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* with its menacing character, Captain Hook (Dowker 1). The saintly invalid types as in Johanna Spyri’s *Heidi* (1872) were often depicted as reformed characters due to their disability. They were typically girls as “reformed invalids” who either died young thereby never making it to adulthood or they experienced a miracle cure. The implication is that persons with disabilities are evil or sick and that in order for disabled persons to live a full and fruitful life, they must somehow be “fixed”, altered or “normalized” to fit into the ubiquitous concept of normal.

From about the 1950s on, narratives for young readers still aimed to teach important lessons but those lessons were different. The intention was towards more realistic situations which were likelier circumstances young people might identify with and perhaps envision themselves. Youth literature, which reflected a “frankness and a willingness to write literature from a youth[s] perspective” was perhaps non-existent before 1940; however, J. D; Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) depicted a new kind of realism in literature. This new perspective in the literary world was reflective of the change in society towards inclusion of the disabled into the mainstream of society, and particularly so with the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1975 which provided the integration of disabled children into public classrooms. According to Susanne Gervay, the “portrayal of disability in youth literature increased and prompted a closer analysis of disability imagery” and she further states that these changes marked a “push for literature specifically catering to youth wants and needs” (Gervay 1). Along with this new realism in youth literature came the impact on the “portrayal of

disability and opened the way for disability to move from secondary to primary characterization” (1).

A contributing factor to the notion of life with impairments is the advancement of medicine during this period which meant that children were living longer more rewarding lives. There was more of a tendency not to hide these children in institutions and “the growing civil rights movement of disabled people taught that defining disabled people in terms of their medical conditions was limited,” and also that there was a need to “consider the ways in which attitudes and prejudice serve to disable others” (Keith 1). However, these positive views in society were not always reflected in children’s narratives. In their attempt to foster awareness of the “problems” of disabled people and a genuine effort in this regard, Keith notes that writers were often clouded by their own narrow views and lack of understanding of what life with a disability was all about. In many instances, their narratives were often “joyless” productions with “confusing messages” (1)

In contrast to the former Pollyannaish, happy ending narratives, the late 1960s and 1970s brought with it a move towards realism in children’s literature. This was the era of integration of blacks to white public schools, sit-ins, demonstrations for rights, the institution of new abortion laws, affordable legal contraception and thereby, a new climate of tolerance and acceptance was blossoming. Writers began to write about more complicated issues that were not easily resolved as with the happy ever after and happy ending narratives. Issues of divorce, death, sex, racism, bullying, and disability were more openly explored in adolescent narratives. However, a commonly used literary device which depicted characters as “outsiders” became popular after the 1970s. This is a trope where a character exists on the “edge of society.” This tended to be a character who had a “problem” which set him or her apart from others in their group. They were

the ones who for some reason or other did not fit in, suffered abuse from a parent, were victims of divorce or even a black teenager trying to navigate an often hostile white world. For the disabled character who appears as the “outsider” figure, the scenario takes a different direction. Lois Keith, author of *Take Up Thy Bed and Walk: Death, Disability and Cure in Classic Fiction for Girls*, notes that the “outsider role in the novel relies on the character being at the center of the story with their views seen as valid and their journey the one with which the reader most identifies. [But] too often in fiction, the disabled character is the ‘outsider’: not the protagonist taking the difficult path towards inclusion, but in a secondary and marginal role” (Keith 2). This can be problematic in that these characters often exist only as a vehicle for allowing the non-disabled protagonist to become a better person or they exist as a way of promoting the development of the able-bodied main character. Lois Keith notes that Pat Thomson dubbed this popularized trend as the “second fiddle books” (ctd. in Keith 3).

The Society for Disability Studies (SDS) rejects the notion that disability is a condition which limits the functioning of the disabled in society or that a disabled person must be “fixed” in order to be a contributing member of society. In fact, Syracuse University’s Center on Human Policy, Law, and Disability Studies explain that the Society for Disability Studies (SDS) generally refers to disability as:

...a social, cultural, and political phenomenon. In contrast to clinical, medical, or therapeutic perspectives on disability, Disability Studies focuses on how disability is defined and represented in society. It rejects the perception of disability as a functional impairment that limits a person’s activities. From this perspective, disability is not a characteristic that exists in the person or a problem of the person that must be “fixed” or “cured.” Instead, disability is a construct that finds its meaning within a social and cultural context which in SDS is referred to as the social model (What is Disability Studies, n.d.)

It is important to understand that there are other models which have been used to understand and describe disability. In Roush and Sharby's article, "Disability Reconsidered: The Paradox of Physical Therapy," they delineate R. Olkin's summary of the other common models which are often tied to the tropes we find in literature and are not necessarily how persons with disabilities in real life want to be viewed. For instance, the moral model "equates disability with sin, loss of faith, or a test of faith"; the medical model places the cause of disability in "anatomical or physiological departures from "normal" that need to be "fixed" or cured" thereby requiring a reliance on specialized professionals to diagnose and treat these conditions (1717-1718). Knowing these models help us to recognize how characters are constructed and understood in literature.

Impacting Young Readers

As readers, we all have a responsibility to critique the material we read. As it pertains to texts which portray disabled characters, we as a community of readers have a responsibility to question how disabled characters are being portrayed. Where young readers are concerned, teachers have an important position in the reading lives of their young readers. Louise Rosenblatt reminds teachers that, "[they] need to be flexible and [they] need to understand where [their] pupils are in relation to books [and that] our main responsibility is to help the student find the right book for growth" (Rosenblatt 71). The important point she makes is *growth*; readers should grow from their experiences in literature. Some literature might even lead to growth in the way the younger generation views disability—the signs are more and more apparent today, and teachers can play an important part, as do writers.

Since disability is “missing from our critical consciousness” as Sharon Snyder et. al puts it, teachers somehow need to make it a part of their teaching and scholarship in the interpretations of texts. First, how do we get books into the hands of young people which portray disability in a believable realistic way? It is vitally important to look at the way disability is constructed in society and how it is represented in literature. Any number of books characterizing people with disabilities may be picked up off the shelves of libraries and bookstores with no guarantee that the portrayals of disability will be positive or better yet, that they will demonstrate the lived experiences of people with disabilities. However, in the classroom, teachers and students have the opportunity to employ critical discourse analysis as a way of exploring narratives to discover within the themes and plots, the issues of identity, agency and power. An important aspect of critically examining texts is to question the power differentials, social inequities and justice. Curwood states that, “At its core, critical pedagogy provides a space to question, analyze, and transform cultural ideologies and social practices” and since disability is often framed as “abnormal” teachers have an opportunity to reframe the depictions of disability and bring a “different understanding of disability, identity and equality” (Curwood 16).

By asking important questions, teachers and students can trouble the assumptions made about people with disabilities by examining the language that appear in novels. Though it is only one aspect of the social construction of disability, it is an essential part because as Ellen Barton says, “the interrelations of language and disability have been seen in the negative connotations of such terms as ‘cripple,’ ‘retard’, ‘spastic’ and ‘handicapped’” (Barton 170). These terms have been bandied about in everyday language, and they appear in texts of all genres. They appear in the mouths of able-bodied and persons with disabilities alike; however, when used by the

disabled community there is a purposeful use of the language that would otherwise be deemed inappropriate, politically incorrect, or rude when used by those in the able-bodied community. This move is somewhat similar to the reclamation of the “n” word in the African American community where the younger generation of blacks have taken back this term, shifting the power of this highly racialized, negative moniker to themselves.

It is perhaps important to understand the changes in language use where disability in Young Adult Literature is concerned since it may appear in some texts that disabled characters are imposing stereotypical language on themselves, which would seem counterproductive to their mission. Some of the more contemporary literature reflects this change, for example, *Mean Little deaf Queer* by Terry Galloway, is a memoir fraught with language which seems to run counter to the challenge of the disabled community. Though not categorized as young adult literature, it portrays a trend by some writers today.

There are activists and those in the disabilities community who have appropriated derogatory terms by taking them back and claiming them as their own as a way of shifting the power from ableists to themselves—terms like *crip*, *Deaf* and others. Many in the disabilities studies community have sought to reclaim “*enabling* as a term of their own rather than one rooted in rehabilitation, social welfare, and medical discourses” (Snyder et. al 3). Over the years, these terms have undergone many changes and they seem to be ever changing. *Freak the Mighty* lends itself nicely to an examination of language and the shift in the power differentials of disabled characters.

Freak the Mighty

This novel is about Max and Kevin, who are middle school students who become friends shortly after Kevin moves in next door following a long absence from the neighborhood. Max lives with his grandparents because his father is in prison for murdering his mother which, by the way, was committed before Max's very eyes. He is rather large in stature for his age and is teased because he is a slow or low functioning reader. Max displays a sense of low self-esteem and often refers to himself as a butthead. Kevin, on the other hand, is small for his age but exceptionally intelligent. He has a physical disability, described as Morquio Syndrome, which forces him to use crutches and braces to walk. This condition is medically described as being caused by a lack of continuity in the breaking up of sugar molecules. The bones develop abnormally so that the spinal cord is longer than the usual size, thus causing the chest to be bell shaped with protruding ribs while facial features tend to be irregular and all joints tend to be problematic.

Although Max sees himself as "stupid" and "brainless," Kevin becomes the catalyst for developing his own voice and identity. Max is fascinated with Kevin's crutches and calls him, "robot boy." As small as Kevin is Max notes that Kevin is confident, fierce, strong-willed and self-assured. He thought, "This little guy is two feet tall, and already he knew what he wanted" (Philbrick 3). The way he spoke to the movers as they were moving in to their home demonstrates to Max that he is not a pitiful person requiring mercy whereas this is what other characters in the narrative are inclined to believe and say. Max states:

...the next thing I notice is this crippled-up yellow-haired midget kid strutting around the sidewalk, giving orders to the beards. He's going: "Hey you, Doofus! Yeah, you with the hairy face, take it easy with that box. That box contains a computer, you know what a computer is?" (7)

As Max and Kevin's relationship grows closer, Kevin teaches Max about the importance of words and reading. He encourages Max to look up words he doesn't understand and tells him, "books are like truth serum—if you don't read, you can't figure out what's real" (19). However, not everyone sees Kevin the way Max does. Max's grandmother "Gram", unintentionally makes condescending remarks about Kevin which he immediately takes an offense to. In a conversation with his Gram, she tells Max that Kevin's mother, Gwen, is a remarkable woman. Then she comments that she's remarkable because she's had to raise that "poor boy" Kevin all on her own. To which Max retorts, "He's not a poor boy...you should hear him talk. I think the rest of him is so small because his brain is so big" (24). What Max ostensibly points to is the propensity of, not just his Gram but, society to view people with a disability as pitiful or pathetic. These are common tropes in media and society in general. As Robert Bogdan and Douglas Biklen have presented in their analysis of children's literature, which is also evident in other narratives, pitiable characters are just one of the 10 common stereotypes associated with the portrayal of people with disabilities (Bogdan 60). Unfortunately, because comments like the one Max's Gram makes go unchallenged by no one else except Max, who by the way is himself ridiculed, they have the potential of perpetuating a limiting stereotype about people with disabilities. Max understands what it feels like to be marginalized by those around him because of his learning disability, and too Max contends with the fact that his father is a murderer and that he so closely resembles him. I question whether Max's issues stem from emotional disturbance because of the horrific scene he witnessed of his mother's murder by his father or a diagnosis of a specific learning disability.

In contrast to the *pathetic* portrayals of disability, there is also the representation of the disabled as having "super" abilities. In this case, Kevin is not just Kevin with a disability but

Kevin the super intelligent boy with a disability, usually termed a “supercrip.” This term came out of the word cripple and is reclaimed by the disabled community. It is an extension of the term “crip” which Eli Clare describes as coming from the long histories of folks who have had cripple used against them. He states, “We have taken the word into our own mouths, rolled it around, shortened it, spoken it with fondness, humor, irony, recognition Moving beyond “crip” to “supercrip” involves a portrayal of a person with a disability as a superstar” (qtd. in Maples et. al, 79). In his own right, Kevin is portrayed as a superstar. His intellectual abilities far outweigh the abilities of Max but also all the adults in the novel. An important question to ask here is: Would the narrative have been just as engaging if Kevin were portrayed as a typical boy with a disability? Would the story be just as interesting if it was about the development of a relationship between a lonely, oversized young friend who has a murderer for a father and the stigma which accompanies it and a kid who is seemingly the exact opposite? How does Max’s character countermand the old tropes of second fiddle? These are the kinds of questions we should ask in order to interrogate the stereotypes of disabled persons so that young adults don’t walk away from these experiences only to perpetuate the same old thinking.

Max and Kevin team up after their encounter with the local gang who want nothing more than to cause trouble and they were an obvious target since Max had taken up with carrying Kevin on his shoulders. This configuration transformed Max and Kevin into an odd, gigantic figure of a person. Max was the legs and Kevin the brains. When they are finally assigned to the same classes at school, this is a perfect scenario for both Kevin and Max because Kevin is relieved from his crutches and braces while Max has his friend and tutor with him at all times during school hours. However, things get out of control pretty quickly when their teacher, Mrs. Donelli, fails to control her students’ response to Max and Kevin. Often in young adult

literature, parents or authority figures are seemingly flabbergasted about what to do with a child with a disability or they are completely resistant, ignorant or silent. Once the initial fascination of Max and Kevin, now called Freak the Mighty, wears off, the whispers and taunting begin.

The students in their class make comments like:

Like hey, who's the midget?
Look what escaped from the freak show;
Forget it, Mrs. Donelli, his brain is in his tail!
Ask him to count, he can paw the ground! (76)

As the disorder mounts, Mrs. Donelli, seems to be more and more helpless in the situation. Max recounts that Mrs. Donelli “has this look like she stepped in something and she can't get it off her shoe. The shouting and singing goes on and on, and pretty soon some of the kids are throwing stuff at us, pencils and erasers and wadded-up paper, and it's like Mrs. Donelli has no idea what to do about it, the room is out of control” (76-7). Kevin emerges as the hero in this situation, the one who assumes power and control as he shouts at the out-of-control students, “Order!...Order in the court! Let justice be heard!” (77). This could be viewed as a positive feature in the text, however, a counter argument to this may be: should Kevin be the one to assume this position? Not only does Kevin assume a “super” role, he is also Max's “savior.”

Beyond the supercrip imagery, there is also the salvation story which is accomplished by using the disabled character to rescue the seemingly “normal” character. This is a troubling message to give youngsters as well. In the end, Kevin's value comes with a price, his life. Shortly after Kevin rescues Max from his murderous father, he dies of complications of his condition. He is constructed as a “tragic victim” whose value only serves to “redeem the ‘normal’ characters” in the narrative (Maples et. al 80). Although Max is himself learning disabled, his disability is less visible than Kevin's which when Kevin dies Max becomes the

redeemed “normal” character. And even though Kevin functions as Max’s “brain,” and Max is in effect silenced, in the end, it is Max who writes their story. With regard to disabled characters, this is a redeeming quality of the novel since it allows Max voice and agency. Again, who has power, who speaks on behalf of disability and how disabled characters are portrayed are important aspects to be considered in literature, not just YA literature. *Stoner & Spaz* features older teenage characters than Max and Kevin and treat topics of sex, drugs, relationships, family and the future aspirations of disabled characters. These issues have, in the past, been designated to non-disabled characters while the disabled character serves as the bystander or vehicle for the main character to grow—not so in *Stoner & Spaz*.

Stoner & Spaz

Stoner & Spaz is a coming of age story which significantly troubles the portrayals of disability as pitiful, tragic, or heroic and too, the archetypal overcoming narrative. This first person narrative has as its protagonist Ben Bancroft, who emerges as a talented, independent individual in spite of his disabilities. He is an individual who is not defined primarily by his disabilities, but rather by his character and abilities. His high school friend, Colleen Minou, a troubled teen, is the catalyst for his self-discovery. The reader also experiences Colleen’s emergence from a life of sexual misadventure and drug abuse as a result of her relationship with Ben. Even though her rehabilitation appears to be brief, she does so by virtue of Ben’s commitment to her. There are themes in this novel that may raise eyebrows in the community or perhaps the administration if this book were to be introduced as a part of the curriculum, but there are laudable aspects of this young adult novel that make it a worthwhile effort to be read and analyzed. I suggest that a deeper appreciation of this novel would be achieved by using the SDS Theory.

When we first meet Ben, he fits the “loner” stereotype which is a common theme for characters with a disability. Watching old movies at the Rialto Theatre is Ben’s consistent pastime because this is where he feels the safest and he can easily go unnoticed. When we first encounter Ben Bancroft, we immediately get the impression of “misfit” because of the exorbitant amount of time he spends alone watching movies at the Rialto. Ben notes that he is “lonely” just like the other “misfits, luddites, castaways and exiles,” who hang out in the theatre just as he does.

Ben has Cerebral Palsy, which leaves him with one side of his body limitedly functional. We get a view into Ben’s thoughts of himself when he says to the ticket agent at the Rialto, “Since it’s Monster Week, do I get a discount?” Whether the ticket agent did not get the joke or reference or just refused to agree with Ben’s view of himself is not quite clear; however, her response to him is comforting, in a sense, when she says, “I don’t think I understand, dear.” The unavoidable question is: what are the dynamics involved which cause him to see himself as a monster? Has Ben bought into the stereotype or has he reclaimed this description for himself as many in the disabilities community have done regarding other incendiary names?

As the narrative progresses, we meet Colleen who shakes Ben down for some money for snacks at the Rialto Theatre and then proceeds to plant herself next to him. She attends the same high school as Ben and is a known drug user. Nevertheless, as much as Ben wants to avoid her, since “she’s nothing but trouble,” (Koertge 5) Colleen engages him in a way that no one else does. She talks to him, looks at him, and seems sincerely interested in what he has to say. He distinguishes the difference between the way Colleen touches him and the way his grandmother does. He notes that no one ever touches him, but Colleen is different because as they sat in the theatre she writes her phone number on his wrist as she holds on to him—with no fear, judgment

or repulsion. This is unlike his own grandmother who just pats him a lot as though she's afraid to touch him. Colleen also does not express any pretense about his disabilities or treats him in a condescending way. In a similar way, Kevin and Max form a bond and friendship, accepting each other based on character rather than on ability. She manages to draw him out of his comfortable and predictable world by accepting him, disability and all. Ben is well aware of Colleen's reputation, but as he evaluates the way she interacts with him, he notes, "...those eyes of hers locked onto mine. Nobody ever looks right at me. Nobody talks about my disability. Nobody ever makes a joke about it. They talk toward me and pretend I'm like everybody else. Better, actually. Brave and strong. A plucky lad" (10). This is important because we immediately sense that the novel will not acquiesce to the stereotypical portrayal of the disabled as pathetic or pitiful, "heroic or overcoming" or the "supercrip." Ironically, the Rialto Theatre, this place of loneliness, is where Ben and Colleen Minou's friendship and subsequent romance is initiated.

The relationship of these two unlikely characters changes the fabric of their lives significantly—for Ben it is seemingly permanent, for Colleen only temporary, but a change nonetheless. These two offer each other something they both need in their disabled lives—Ben offers Colleen dedicated, dependable friendship and Colleen's response to Ben is honest and accepting in spite of his disabilities. She draws him out of his reclusive world by introducing him to new people and new experiences. This is significant for Ben because as Jeanna Fuston White stresses, "disability begins only when that physical condition leads to social exclusion, either by stigmatization or by denial of access to public spaces" (White 137). Colleen does not pander to Ben's disability and neither does she allow him to use it to make excuses for his life. At school, Ben notes that he is invisible to his classmates. While in the cafeteria, or as it's

referred to, the Pit, he states, “she [Stephanie] turns away and scans the Pit. I’m almost right in front of her, and she doesn’t even see me. Not really, I’m just the resident spaz, invisible as the sign that says NO RUNNING, the one nobody pays any attention to” (23). Ben complains to Colleen that people don’t talk to him. We see the emerging “loner” theme but it is countered by Colleen’s directness. As readers, this is a good opportunity to question the behaviors and attitudes we have about persons with disabilities. Are they excluded or included in typical everyday interactions? People with disabilities are often cast aside, looked over and looked passed as though they do not exist. But this exchange between Colleen and Ben immediately grounds the issue surrounding Ben’s complaints about being invisible:

“I’m a spaz, in case you haven’t noticed.”

Colleen holds out her hand and lifts a finger for every name: “Don Secoli is in a wheelchair, and he’s Mr. High School. Karen Radley’s practically deaf, and she still plays drums in some garage band. Doris Schumacher’s blind, and all you have to do is say one word to her and she knows who you are. Get over yourself, okay?” (73)

Colleen challenges Ben by asking him whose fault is it that he’s invisible at school. She verbalizes for Ben his responsibility in fostering relationships with those around him as well as the place he should make for himself in the world. She takes on a role that most are not willing to do. She speaks honestly and openly and does not allow Ben’s disability to construct a barrier to engagement despite his disability, which is often the case with the able-bodied community when they encounter persons with disabilities. Engagement with one another requires two parties.

The portrayal of Ben as a vibrant, intelligent, aspiring teen imbued with desires for love and relationship is refreshing because there is a tendency for the able-bodied or “normal” folk

not to think of persons with disabilities as having the same kinds of aspirations. Unlike novels such as *Flower for Algernon*, this novel shows Ben as a typical young man with sexual desires and a longing for friendships with his peers. Even with themes of drug addiction, sex, racial stereotyping, and “adult” language, as a young adult novel, it is worthwhile interrogating because of the frankness of the language about disability. In analyzing this novel, it would be appropriate to use the “Disability Lens” or evaluate from the perspective of the disabled to develop a deeper understanding of the salient issues of disability and how it is addressed in the novel.

Although the reader will encounter some of the common stereotypes regarding disability in this novel, Ben (aka Spaz) transitions from some of these biases to a fully functioning teen in his community. This is the view young adults should be encouraged to have about persons with disabilities. We learn that Ben has a deep desire to be with his peers and enjoy the things that typical teenagers do. Ben realizes in the midst of watching a movie, *The Magnificent Seven*, which he usually enjoys, that on this particular occasion, the movie depresses him. He notices that the characters in the movie, “are everything that [he] is not. Not just tall and good looking with arms and legs that work...They at least do stuff. They get out of the house.” He further states, “I know they’re loners, but they’re loners with friends...loners aren’t always alone” (Koertge 17). It does not matter that he has a grandmother who loves and cares for him, what he wants is friendship with his peers. Granted, his new friend Colleen has her own set of problems, a drug habit, and sexual promiscuity—however, she talks *with* Ben, not at him. They chat about the movie they both watched at the theatre, she asks if his grandmother could give her a ride home—typical of interactions between people who are friendly enough with each other. One of the striking brief conversations they have is when Colleen asks Ben, while looking at the foot he drags along, “does it hurt?” When he tells her “No, not really” she points to his shoe and says,

“Those are fucked, by the way”(12). She speaks directly about his disability and has no compunction about telling him what she honestly thinks. Some may think her words are crude and unfeeling; however, that kind of brutal honesty is what draws Ben and Colleen together and is perhaps typical of how kids their age talk to each other. She does not pity Ben, but treats him as a peer and she drawn to him as well. And, perhaps for the reader, Koertge removes the penchant towards pity for the disabled character. Additionally, we get our first glimpse of Ben as a sexual being when Colleen touches his arm. She writes her phone number on his arm so he could call her to give her the plot of the novel, *The Great Gatsby*. The aspect of sexuality is directly addressed in the novel, not only by virtue of this encounter but also later in the novel when Ben and Colleen become sexually involved—a notion that disrupts the typical portrayal in novels or for that matter in film of persons with disabilities as not having sexual desires. Koertge normalizes the notion of sexuality for the differently-abled as sexuality for the typical able-bodied teen is an ever-present primary concern.

The novel encourages its audience to envision Ben as a typical teen searching for a place and purpose in society. Marcie, Ben’s filmmaking next door neighbor and Colleen, give him encouragement and the push which enables him to discover a possible direction for his life, that of filmmaking. Here again, the notion that persons with disabilities are incapable of fully participating in everyday life, are burdensome or even that they are “super”-something, is dispelled. Colleen challenges Ben’s own perceptions of himself by looking at him from the inside out, rather than from the outside in. Tobin Sieber’s article, “Disability in Theory: From Social Constructionism to the New Realism of the Body,” discusses the notion of the body as being socially constructed. He notes, “Disability offers a challenge to the representation of the body...in that the disabled body provides insight into the fact that all bodies are socially

constructed—that social attitudes and institutions determine far greater than biological fact the representation of the body’s reality” (Siebers 1). Likewise, Rosemarie Garland-Thompson asserts, “disability is not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do” (ctd. in White 134). Ben has the capability to interact with his peers, go to parties, and pursue an interest beyond the sheltered and lonely path that had been prescribed for him by his grandmother, his community, and the larger society. However, the attitudes toward the abilities of the disabled have the tendency to create barriers rather than opportunities for the differently-abled in our society. This novel does not allow us to internalize attitudes and stereotypes of the disabled as unproductive or disconnected members of the community.

Jen Scott Curwood’s use of critical discourse analysis asks important questions about how “normalcy and disability is constructed, contested and re-envisioned” in selected pieces of literature. Further, this kind of analysis highlights the ways in which identity, agency, and power shape the plots and themes in a novel. These questions offer a counternarrative to normalcy narratives and how disability is depicted. Essentially, the dominant assumptions about what it means to be able-bodied and a resistance to the dominant normalcy narratives are questioned (Curwood 21). In taking a sociocultural approach to literacy in her research she asks these and other important questions:

- Which character embodies or expresses a normalcy narrative?
- Which character challenges a normalcy narrative: What are the personal or political implications of this challenge?
- (How) does the author integrate a disability counternarrative into the storyline? Is it evident in the character’s thoughts, words, or actions?
- How does disability shape the character’s identity? What other factors come into play as the character makes (and remakes) his or her identity? (21)

These are good, sophisticated questions to ask but a more succinct set of questions offered by Vivian Yenika-Agbaw which all readers could apply to any level book—children to adult—are the following:

Whose story is this?
Who is on top?
Who acts? Who is acted upon?
Who gets punished?
Who speaks? Who is silenced?
Who looks? Who is observed? (93)

Valerie Struthers Walker offers a reader response critical lens as a way to launch into discussions about disability and to read diverse texts more critically. The point as Maples et. al seem to emphatically state is, “If stereotypical representations of characters with disabilities are not identified and challenged, another generation of people may hold on to outdated and unhealthy assumptions about real people with disabilities” (77). How writers understand disability and how we as readers respond to them can help change the attitude towards persons in the disabled community. Attitudes shape interactions and expectations and writers are no less influenced by the pervasive social culture, particularly as it pertains to disability. As forward thinking as Daniel Keyes’ novel *Flowers for Algernon* may present itself to be, there is evidence of the demeaning, stereotypical attitudes toward disability which existed in the culture fifty or so years ago when Keyes was writing this novel.

Flowers for Algernon

Today considered a classic novel, *Flowers for Algernon* is one that is often taught in secondary schools and is typically well received by young adults. According to Brent Walter Cline, this 21st Century Hugo winning science fiction novel is one of the most widely read which

concerns mental disability (Cline). It is the story of Charlie Gordon who is a mentally disabled man and tells his story by journaling his thoughts in what he calls “progress reports.” He undergoes an operation to improve his intelligence, and the transformation which he undergoes is recorded in progress reports. The reader has access to Charlie’s thoughts and emotions as his cognitive ability reaches the level of genius as result of the surgery. This novel, written over fifty years ago, complicates the historical reading of disability in a text seemingly geared towards young adults. If, perhaps at the initial presentation, this text was aimed at an adult readership, the reading is still problematic in terms of portraying disability as compared to the young adult novels today which portray disabled characters in their pages. Whereas novels like the aforementioned *Freak the Mighty* and *Stoner and Spaz* have disabled characters who are protagonists with power and voice, we find that pre-operative Charlie is a character who, though given voice albeit through writing, is constructed in a way that causes the reader to pity him for his “powerlessness and innocent strangeness” (Cline).

One can appreciate learning about Charlie’s experiences from Charlie himself as opposed to a distant, omniscient voice or through the actions and perceptions of his friends and family. The duality created here is visibility and power which is afforded to Charlie since *he* tells the story of his experiences while at the same time he is rendered pitiful and powerless in a society which may view Charlie as a pathetic mistake. As Charlie writes, the reader is aware that he is unable to see the outright abuse foisted on him by his “friends” at work and also the fact that his family has abandoned him.

In Daniel Keyes’ memoir he states, “I didn’t want my readers to laugh at Charlie. Maybe laugh with him, but not at him” (Keyes 80). Readers may not have laughed at Charlie but likely pitied him. One may end up asking, which is better? The reader is hard-pressed to laugh at

Charlie; however, the way in which Charlie seeks to express his thoughts and experiences, meaning his writing ability and the treatment he receives from his so-called friends and family, fosters the unavoidable feeling of pity in the reader which in itself presents a problem as it pertains to the disabled community. Cline cites Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell's article, "Disability Haunting in American Poetics," noting that these representations of disability "help create the pervasiveness of disability lessons that infuse U.S. education curricula and the contemporary literary canon" (ctd. in Cline). Through Charlie's own eyes the reader witnesses the cruelty of his friends towards him and the rejection of his family while Charlie himself is unaware. The reader notes that Charlie works alongside this "friends" at the bakery but their view of him is more often than not, disparaging. Charlie writes about how he would like to be smart enough to join in the conversations with his friends about important things. He states, "Then when I am smart they will talk to me and I can sit with them and listen like Joe Carp and Frank and Gimpy so when they talk and have a discushen about imporment things...like about god or about the truble with all the money the presedint is spending or about the ripublicans and democrats" (Keyes 15). Though Charlie writes, his writing is likely viewed as strange and "abnormal," and because he is so innocently unaware of how he is treated by his so called friends, the reader is forced to pity him.

Although Charlie gives the doctors permission to operate on his brain which will make him smarter we can see that he is still *acted upon* since he really cannot conceptualize the gravity of the surgery. It is here that the question of who has power comes into play. He may understand that there are some risks to the surgery but how fully he understands is questionable. Like his friends at the bakery, the professors use him or take advantage of an opportunity to "cure" Charlie of his disability and he is thus "swallowed up by the sophisticates behind the

university walls and “little rooms” (Cline). This novel seems to follow the medical model of disability as a condition that needs to be cured. Charlie desires to be cured in order to be smarter but this deep desire is fueled by the treatment her receives from those around him.

The representation of disability in this novel follows the pity-inducing trope of infantilizing mental disability, especially as the novel opens but it also aligns disability with tragedy and death. After Charlie’s operation, his intelligence gradually increases to the point of genius level, even surpassing the acumen of the professors who researched and recommended the surgery for him. However, though the operation is successful, his superior intelligence only lasts for a short time and he returns to his original state of intelligence. Charlie’s return to his original state after the surgery was always a possibility and as his former intelligence level returns the notion of Charlie as a character endowed with “purpose, love, imagination and sexuality” ceases to exist. There is a suggestion here that intelligent Charlie dies or ceases to exist and mental disability is the deadly cause and Charlie, as a mentally differently-abled, man is in effect dead too. This is not unlike Kevin who dies due to complications of his disability. Both novels succumb to the trope of *death by disability*.

This association of death and tragedy with disability is a common trope particularly with texts written in the 19th century and early 20th century novels. Pre-operative Charlie is never presented as a character who has a fulfilled life with purpose, love, sexuality, and so forth. He is, however, a character filled with a longing for acceptance and inclusion. Pre-operative Charlie is very much aware that he is not included in important conversations with his friends and for that matter appears to be aware of his exclusion in various encounters. He, in fact, has an unquenchable desire to be other than he is and is driven, against all the possible odds, to receive the surgery that will make him “smart.” Post-operative Charlie recalls that before he became

intelligent he was aware of the difference between himself and other people. He states that, “Even in my dullness I knew I was inferior. Other people had something I lacked—something denied me....Even the feeble-minded man wants to be like other men” (Keyes 199). This profound statement made by Charlie reminds us that cognitive ability, whether high or low functioning, does not preclude treating others with respect, dignity, and entitlements to all the amenities in their society as those in the so-called able-bodied/intelligent community. Again, when these attitudes persist in the global community, it is likely to show up in the pages of literature, regardless of the targeted audience. There is no question that the public is educated through literature and other forms of media as well. Ostensibly, it is by these means that the view of disability can be changed.

Keyes’ narrative takes an interesting turn and allows a look at disability from a different perspective, that of the disabled who can now discern the negative responses to his own disability as well as to reflect on that treatment and to experience the difference between “abled” and “disabled.” Keyes, in fact, turns the table back on disability and readers are able to experience what a disabled person may think and feel about disability. When post-operative Charlie begs to keep his job at the bakery his former co-worker friends are less than open to the idea of him staying employed along with them. Mr. Donner, Charlie’s boss, says he has to let him go because the other workers are afraid of him. As Charlie reflects on the reaction to his new intelligence he says, “It had been all right as long as they could laugh at me and appear clever at my expense, but now they were feeling inferior to the moron” (Keyes 106). Charlie highlights for the reader the way society interacts with disabled individuals. Since he had become intelligent his “friends” no longer accepted him because he now “emphasized their inadequacies” which left them feeling betrayed and they hated Charlie for it (106).

Even Alice, Charlie's former teacher and love interest, takes post-operative Charlie to task and accuses him of being arrogant and selfish. When Charlie pays a visit to his former school, the "Center for Retarded Adults," demonstrating his higher intelligence which his speech and demeanor reflects, Alice becomes incensed and annoyed at Charlie. He had said hello and spoke kindly to his former classmates, but Alice felt that he had been selfish and cruel. She slammed the book she was holding and said, "You're different. You've changed. And I'm not talking about your I.Q. It's your attitude toward people—you're not the same kind of human being...I mean it. There was something in you before. I don't know... a warmth, an openness, a kindness that made everyone like you and like to have you around" (Keyes 122). This reaction to Charlie is curious since he had not been cruel or unkind toward any of the students at the "Center." What would make her so accusatory of Charlie? In fact, it seems to be that post-operative Charlie is no longer the unassuming, doormat that everyone didn't mind dismissing or treating with disregard, which is an all too common story in the lives of the disabled and an all too common trope found in novels too many to name. Often, these characters appear in the texts for the sole purpose of promoting the personal development of the main, able-bodied character. Self-aware, new Charlie, knows and understands the kind of treatment he had been previously given. He doesn't hesitate to tell Alice, "Did you think I'd remain a docile pup, wagging my tail and licking the foot that kicks me? ... I no longer have to take the kind of crap that people have been handing me all my life" (Keyes 123). The unfortunate truth is that in life and in literature the disabled are marginalized and oftentimes treated with cruel disregard, but what Keyes does manage to achieve in his narrative is to give a voice, though not a strong voice, to the experience of the cognitively disabled by the able-bodied world. The voice is not as strong as it could be since it is not pre-operative Charlie who voices his displeasure and anger at his treatment but the

new and improved, transformed Charlie. Here again, the question of power differentials comes into play. After all, it is transformed Charlie who demonstrates power, even though he is seen as an “arrogant, self-centered, antisocial bastard” (247). Certainly, for the cognitively disabled, the notion of speaking out against ill treatment, for some, would be a challenge, but at this particular point in the narrative the reader is able to move from pitying Charlie to a confrontation of how the able-bodied world responds to this part of society.

Do writers have a responsibility to reduce prejudice and to educate children about disability? Writers have a built in opportunity of achieving this goal by writing books that deliver themes about disability which are not condescending but real, accurate and of course enjoyable. Smith-D’Arezzo’s quotes Hallahan and Kauffman who state, “Along with the diversity in race, culture, and language ... there is also diversity in educational needs and abilities” (Smith-D’Arezzo 75). Educating young people is what writers ostensibly do by virtue of the fact that for the most part, we read in order to grow and become enlightened. So, it seems to make sense that writers may have a responsibility, but I gather that this is probably an unpopular view. In a most profound way, Charlie, Ben and Kevin teach the world that the disabled are not cursed, are not demons, and are not useless wastes of life. Instead they are individuals who demand regard, respect and to be seen for who they really are—not gawked at and dismissed.

Caroll and Rosenblum state that, “...young adult literature must present information, topics, themes, and questions in ways that are not didactic, condescending, or pedantic” (Caroll and Rosenblum 623). They also highlight Annette B. Heims’ five criteria for evaluating books which depict mentally disabled characters. In so doing, the following criteria should be applied to texts which depict disabled characters, not just to young adults, but to readers at all levels:

First, the information contained in the text should be accurate with accurate terminology. For example, though *Freak the Mighty* is a fictional tale, Kevin's condition is real and the fact that he dies in the end is a real possibility with Morquio Syndrome. Second, these books should avoid stereotypes of the disabled. Memoirs or autobiographies tend to give a more realistic insight into the life of a person with a disability—and though Keyes is not writing a memoir or autobiography, Charlie voices the experience of the disabled to the world in his journals. The reader is able, even if only marginally, to get *inside* and share the space of the person experiencing the disability. Third, the book in which the disabled character appears should be well written. A good test of a book's quality for young adult readers are those books which have earned the distinction of being awarded the American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults, or ALA's Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults. Fourth, these texts should confront disability in a realistic manner. Rather than overemphasizing the disability, the text should provide evidence of the challenges the character faces because of it. Finally, the book should avoid simply using a character who is disabled to promote the growth of a nondisabled character in the book. Of the three novels highlighted here, the character of Ben Bancroft is perhaps the best portrayal of a disabled character in the current literature. Unlike Kevin who succumbs to the typical trope and dies in the end and Charlie who is "cured" and returns to his former cognitive state which is likened to a death knell, Ben experiences growth in spite of his disability, has plans for a future seemingly filled with hope, develops meaningful relationships and a prospect of contributing something of value to the world.

How can we know when disability is an accepted part of the human condition? Perhaps when the disabled are no longer "othered." Perhaps we will know when we in the able-bodied community no longer see disability as dysfunction, disease, valueless and unacceptable. Even in

our highly technological 21st century world, it would seem to make sense that technology would bridge the gap between both communities. Perhaps the finality of this quest will come when navigating our present world no longer requires retrofitting to suit different abilities because they will have been thought about at the outset, maybe then we might say we have arrived. If disability is a social construct, then it seems possible that one day the popular aphorism, “It’s not the wheelchair that’s disabling, it’s the stairs into the building” will become dead phrase having lost its meaning.

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