

Meyer, Abbye E. *From Wallflowers to Bulletproof Families: The Power of Disability in Young Adult Narratives*. UP of Mississippi, 2022. 204 pages. ISBN: 9781496837585

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A common observation in disability studies is that historically, disability has been a unifying marginalisation—the one intersection from which other identities hope for distance or even escape (Mitchell & Snyder 3; Davis 277). Problem novels, often dismissed as an inevitable but undesired aspect of adolescent literature (Miskec & McGee 164), occupy a similar space in studies of youth literature. These texts are often considered representative of young adult literature by those *outside* of children’s literature studies and are often treated defensively by those of us within it as a stereotype the field must overcome. There is, however, very little scholarship explicitly on problem novels. Abbye E. Meyer’s work, *From Wallflowers to Bulletproof Families: The Power of Disability in Young Adult Narratives*, offers a new defence and reinterpretation of the problem novel as she asks readers to consider these significant gaps in the literature: “the ways in which disability and young adult literature interact” and “the kinds of power these interactions produce” (12). As an analysis of American representations of disability and adolescence, Meyer’s work is often compelling, especially in its recontextualization of “exemplary” didacticism (Meyer 96). While I do question the conflation of adolescence *as* disabling in early chapters as potentially overly diagnostic and easily misread (and as a non-American reader I lament the limitations in attributing the “young adult voice” (16) so squarely to Holden Caulfield and Esther Greenwood), Meyer’s work is an important contribution to both literary and disability studies as we continue to engage on topics of representation, voice, and crip power.

Chapter One, “Radical Readings of Disability” (3), maps out the rest of the work and places Meyer’s scholarship in the context of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Ato Quayson, Lennard Davis and others. Chapter Two “Wallflowers: Disability as the Young Adult Voice” begins with readings of J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963) to find what Meyer terms, “the distinctive young adult voice” (13), arguing that the voice of adolescence and the voice of disability are deeply enmeshed. “In many ways,”

she suggests, “both literarily and societally, adolescence is a disability, while disability is a kind of adolescent state” (13). While the readings themselves are nuanced and Meyer does consider the more troubling implications of this from a disability studies perspective (17), adolescence is something one is meant to grow out of. To say the same of disability reinforces some vexed, medical framings of disability and impairment. This conflation detracts from an otherwise lucid discussion of ways in which disability and adolescence can and do interact, as well as potential cripp readings of trauma in young adult narratives. Meyer’s reading of Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), which closes out Chapter Two, is particularly productive for discussion of trauma through a disability lens.

The three chapters that follow examine common representations of disability in literature and the ways that young adult narratives can expose these tropes and explicitly challenge the use of disabled characters as narrative prosthetic or plot device, and the negative implications that often arise from this representation. In Chapter Three, “Fruits: Disability as a Literary Metaphor” (37), Meyer argues that “commonly, disability works metaphorically as a shallow representation of societal otherness or as a signifier of tragedy, which perhaps provokes wisdom or insight” (37). The disability in these stories is subsumed by the message it represents. Some texts—here, Meyer highlights *The Virgin Suicides* (2003) and *The Secret Fruit of Peter Paddington* (2005)—may still use disability metaphorically to produce greater insight and meaning, while still allowing disability to exist as a medical, social, and political identity. Meyer adds that “complex literary metaphors allow texts to complicate and empower both adolescence and disability—especially by confusing and conflating the identities” (14). This chapter is more successful than Meyer’s earlier discussions on the potential critical power of viewing adolescence as disabling, as it draws on a more relational understanding of disability to consider these possibilities. Meyer draws upon Lennard Davis’ work to argue that adolescence “may offer a time when nonstable

identity categories are allowed to flourish—not without difficulty for the disabled and adolescent characters, as societal and outside pressures push them to eliminate their nonnormative characteristics, but with a celebration in the narratives themselves” (61). Intersections of fatness, disability, and queerness are also explored to good effect in the reading of *The Secret Fruit*.

Chapter Four, “Freaks: Disability as a Catalyst for Growth” (62), draws on Ato Quayson’s work on aesthetic nervousness and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s work on staring and non-normative narrative to re-examine the freak, one of the more studied representations of disability in literature. Freaks—in literature and culture—are marked as disabled, different, or nonnormative; are treated as a supporting character; and are used as a spectacle and catalyst for growth in others. Meyer’s work is evocative here, as they argue that “freaks appear so regularly that they often go unnoticed; they are ubiquitous, underdeveloped, not fully human, infantilized sidekicks, and they are used for others’ moments of self-realization and self-congratulation” (14). She divides her analysis into three categories: “freaks” of the type just described (62); “developed, complicated freaks” (66) such as Auggie Pullman from R. J Palacio’s *Wonder* (2012), which contains the familiar stereotype of freakery despite an attempt to include the disabled child’s voice; and “revolutionary freaks” (76), which “[begins] to push boundaries and to experiment with the function and identity” of the trope (14). The key text examined here is Ron Koertje’s *Stoner and Spaz* (2002), in which the traditional freak narrative is exposed, challenged, and ultimately destroyed (76) through the protagonist’s use of humour, and a close, variously crip community. Some diagnostic language detracts from the analysis—Meyer describes Ben’s cerebral palsy as “mild” (76), for example, which may reinforce hierarchical framings of disability even in discussions of texts that seek to undermine them—but the discussion is an important contribution to a key element of disability in literature.

Chapter Five, “Accidents: Disability as a Political Identity” (85), reclaims problem novels as important literary and political narratives, making an engaging argument toward well-deployed didacticism as a political tool. Three key texts demonstrate these possibilities, including Harriet McBryde Johnson’s *Accidents of Nature* (2006), Terry Truman’s *Inside Out* (2003) and Ginny Rorby’s *Hurt Go Happy* (2006). The range of texts displayed also exemplifies one of the strengths of *From Wallflowers to Bulletproof Families* as a whole: visible, invisible, psychosocial, and intellectual disability—and intersections of these disabilities—are addressed throughout. Disabilities that are not routinely considered as impairments under the social model by those with these diagnoses themselves, such as members of the Deaf community and those who experience a range of neurodivergence, are discussed with care and an understanding of the social and medical history that influences this discourse. Meyer argues that “while standard problem novels strive for accuracy, deliver didactic messages, and focus on a single problem,” disability or otherwise, novels like Johnson’s “find ways to offer accurate analyses of problems *without* sidelining rich stories and characters” (emphasis in original 14). On *Accidents of Nature*, Meyer writes:

While the adolescent characters in *Accidents of Nature* may follow expectations for young adult literature by ‘tell[ing] the reader what they have learned’ (Trites, *Disturbing* 71), these characters are not finished learning, they are not taught by authoritative adult characters, and their problems are *not solved*. Johnson’s text serves as a model for what problem novels may be: convincing, educational, didactic, as well as complicated, ambiguous, difficult, and provocatively unfinished (emphasis in original 86).

Through their explicit acknowledgement of “disability as a real, politicized identity, the novels presented in this chapter introduce characters, as well as readers, to the goals and actions of disability-rights movements” (14). An “exemplary problem novel” (106), Meyer

suggests, will overlook neither daily frustrations and joys nor larger, systemic difficulties faced by disabled characters, and while also bringing the reader to a place beyond simply “understanding” or empathizing with disabled lives.

Chapter Six, “Bulletproof Families: Disability as the Unifier” (107), “widens the definition of young adult literature from novels (published no earlier than the mid-1900s) to include narratives in other media: nonfiction essays and memoirs, songs, television series, films, and texts in a number of digital media that radically alter narrative formats” (15). These range from Scott Silveri’s *Speechless* (2016), still one of only a few television programs about disability to feature a disabled actor with the same impairment (MacCarthy 303), the musical oeuvre of Glaswegian band Belle and Sebastian’s Stuart Murdoch, before and after his myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) diagnosis, to the participatory digital literature of Disability Twitter, particularly Alice Wong’s Disability Invisibility Project. Meyer highlights ways in which these disparate texts reflect and redefine both the narrative voice and the expected uses of disability in young adult novels. “Young adult disability narratives that are delivered through and affected by digital media combine elements of literary criticism, narrative expression, disability theories, and political activism both to create and to represent the solidarity of family-like communities” (15), as demonstrated through Meyer’s reading of Disability Twitter, fan communities, and other digital spaces. Later, Meyer suggests that “[t]he resulting unstable mess of literary forms, narrative techniques, authorial identities, inconsistent expectations, unknown audiences, and forceful political messages suggests that the reshaping and redefining is only beginning” (150). Meyer also traces the origins of the #OwnVoices hashtag in this chapter, and some of the challenges that arose from a disability-led movement becoming co-opted by mainstream publishing. While this is a deeply engaging chapter, some of the selected texts seem out of scope. Murdoch’s writings particularly, both as part of and outside of Belle and Sebastian, deserve their own space, and

while Meyer makes good arguments for the narrator of many Belle and Sebastian songs as indicative of a disabled young adult voice, this work feels out of place in what has previously been defined as an entirely North American text selection.

In the concluding chapter, “Solidarity in Expression and Action” (150), Meyer reflects on disability as an “unstable category” (Davis qtd. in Meyer 153) and how the “[n]arratives and characters considered in this project—from the wallflower narrators who conflate adolescence and disability, to the multi-voiced narrators who question all individual identities—certainly project such instability in representation” (Meyer 153). Understanding disability as destabilising, and the political and narrative potential of this destabilisation, however, does require understanding both the systemic and social contributions to our current framing of disability as well as how disability is historically deployed in literary works. *From Wallflowers to Bulletproof Families* is a strong attempt at the latter, while still being deeply informed by the disability rights movement. Toward the end of the text, Meyer skilfully links #OwnVoices to the older, powerful “Nothing About Us Without Us” (Charlton 70). Embracing “Nothing About Us Without Us,” members of the disabled community must feel capable of participating in policy making and confident in influencing political, social, and, Meyer’s project suggests, literary trends. In this way, “young adult disability narratives suggest collaboration, honest communication, and solidarity in expression and action” (154).

In 2022, following the Global Disability Summit, there were calls to change the slogan in a small but crucial way: “Nothing without us” (Pfeifer). Disabled people are worth more than representations that emphasise perceived suffering or the aesthetic nervousness we produce in a reader over our humanity. Meyer’s work does not lose sight of this. While the explicit conflation of disability and adolescence in Meyer’s analysis may risk easy pathologizing and misreading, this is confident, curious work that is not afraid of unfinished answers to evolving questions. This project, especially when Meyer draws on both literary

and disability studies to show how problem novels may draw on more than familiar stereotype to have narrative and political heft, reads as progress toward that goal.

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