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cjdseditor@uwaterloo.ca

Firmston, K. (2014). *Stupid*. Toronto: James Lormier and Company. ISBN 978-14594-0612-4.

Reviewed by W. John Williamson
Calgary Catholic School District
wjohn.williamson@cssd.ab.ca

> *Stupid. Maybe I am stupid. It's what everybody calls me. Stupid. Loser. Dumb. Lazy. And the labels, they seem so real. Especially when words spin, drift, blur. Sometimes I get lost, daydreaming, forget to check where I'm walking. Like I could travel for days in a haze of imagination. The glow of a bottle in a floodlight can hold me captivated for seconds, minutes, hours. Is it stupid? Am I? Probably. But, I see things you don't. I see my city in ways your normal brain can't imagine. And my spinning, upside-down world can express my dreams while you sit there, stagnant, watching your sports channel.* (204).

Kim Firmton's (2014) *Stupid* is ostensibly a high interest low vocabulary (hi-low) novel marketed primarily to young adult readers, and particularly to young adults who experience reading more linguistically complex texts as difficult. I would suggest, however, that in its portrayal of labelling, institutional barriers, and discourses of dyslexia it would be a fruitful resource to initiate conversations about disability studies and inclusion in both secondary and post-secondary (particularly teacher-education) classrooms as well as in any communities interested in critical discussions of inclusion. In a narrative that recalls Peters et. al's (1998) metaphors of learning disabled teens, Firmston, a writer who identifies as dyslexic and who sets her novel in the current inception of the Alberta K-12 education system she was educated in, portrays a talented adolescent's aesthetic attempts to translate the "dirge" that is his home and school experience into a "flexible song script with an upbeat tempo" (cited in Gabel, 2005, p.

33). Unlike many popular portrayals of disabled youth this story succeeds in transcending familiar supercrip/inspiration porn stereotypes in its realistic portrayal of a teen trying to realize and develop his talents, a father-son relationship characterized by mutual distrust, and a school system that is convincingly indifferent to the needs of the main character. The more dynamic aspects of the story, including Martin's improvisational adventures linked to the art of guerilla film-making and the high flying sport of Parkour, are also believably depicted. Martin is not trying to and (spoiler alert) does not achieve great fame and fortune through his art or sport; he just begins to experience a broader range of inclusion.

At the beginning of the story we encounter Martin trespassing on the private site of a former Calgary brewing company, seeking footage of a landscape he has sought out because it is "dark. Crumbling. Disorganized. Garbage. Like me" (12). Later on in the first chapter he explains that he enjoys film-making in part because "things look different when you view them from a lens. There's a depth you don't get in real life. Small things become huge…[a]nd things that are irritating can be blurred or move out of the shot entirely" (14).

Firmston goes on to offer a vivid look at some of these "irritating things." Martin encounters a school system characterized by policies of biopower that routinely impose narrow and unaccommodated assessment methods and that have saddled him with the inaccurate label of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The diagnosis cuts off any further institutional or parental inquiry as to the nature of his academic struggle and forces him into taking a medication that makes him feel sick. Firmston demonstrates familiarity with the sorting rituals of the Alberta education system in that her protagonist identifies himself as "not even an English 10-1" student (68), meaning that he feels himself unsuitable for the more "academic" stream in which he has, at the insistence of his parents, been placed. Through her protagonist, the

author explains how the "lower" academic tier of English 10-2 that Martin longs for involves more discussion, group work, and creative projects, while the academic level eschews these things and focusses instead on essay writing, comprehension tests, and silent reading, all of which make his dyslexia stand out as disabling.

While Martin's mother is, for the most part, presented as potentially sympathetic to his experiences of barriers but too preoccupied to intervene successfully to support him, Martin's father is one of the main antagonistic forces in the story. Much of conflict involves his aggressive and punitive attempts to wrest his son out of what he misperceives as academic complacency. This bellicose parent repeatedly refers to his son with the titular label "stupid," views his love of filmmaking as a distraction from academics, relentlessly surveilles his room looking for evidence of drugs, and dismisses Martin's concern that when he tried to read the "words move around" (119).

Left with few options or resources to escape the barriers he faces at school and at home Martin engages in what Allan (2008), citing Foucault, described as transgressive, boundary-crossing behaviors in order to cope. In some cases, Martin's transgressions simply involve strategies to access supports he should be receiving in the first place, such as lingering so long over a question on a make-up exam that the teacher eventually loses patience and verbally explains the question, or using the film *To Kill A Mockingbird* as a tool to help understand the complex text he has been assigned to read for homework. Other transgressions more directly challenge boundaries of sanctioned conduct. When forced to read aloud in class as a punishment for drawing a film storyboard in class instead of paying attention to the lecture, Martin breaks into a pop song. Instead of complying with his medication regime, Martin sells his Ritalin to a school drug dealer and uses the money to buy filmmaking equipment and to bribe his sister,

whose presentation as a learner matches up much better to traditional schooling, to write his essays for him. While Firmston does not depict these as particularly constructive behaviors, she does avoid condemning them as, at this point in the narrative, Martin is presented with so few options to improve his situation that these things are "a way of avoiding control without confrontation" (Bloor & McIntosh, cited in Allan, 2008, p. 93).

When Martin meets a Parkour practitioner during one of his nighttime shoots and develops an interest in the sport as a subject for his filmmaking, his strategies shift from transgression to aesthetics. He begins to make a film to "match the parkour moves to the things [he] experience[s] in real life" (59). Parkour is a particularly apt metaphor as the improvised and gymnastic movements over and around the (often dangerous) physical barriers of the urban environment tellingly evoke Martin's skillful movements through institutional spaces that are indifferent or even hostile to his learning needs. In a voiceover depicting the images of his friends engaged in Parkour, stylistically rendered in footage emphasizing their daring and grace, Martin describes not the physical action which speaks for itself but his own journey through educational labelling to realizing that he is "*Creative. Unique. An Artist. And this is [his] world"* (205).

The novel's space between the extended metaphor of Parkour and Martin's experience collapses as he begins to practice the sport as well as filming it. This assists him therapeutically as his improved balance and physical fitness help him better control the shifting text he experiences when he reads. Firmston also goes on to describe a variety of additional text-management techniques and academic strategies that Martin develops to realize improved academic success. In an interview, Firmston described being criticized over the speed with which Martin begins to experience improved school success, and responded that these passages

mirrored her own use of these strategies in school as well as her own rate of realizing higher academic success (Porras, 2016).

A concern that might be raised about *Stupid* from a disability studies perspective, especially if the novel were to be used in a pre-service teacher education class on inclusion or as an inclusion-themed assigned or optional reading recommended to adolescents as a part of a English or Language Arts class, involves its relationship to the biomedical model of disability, which if not inherently ableist is rightfully posited by scholars and activists as facilitating normative and "lesser than" understandings of disability in its emphasis on medicalized individual impairment. Critics might suggest that even "positive" depictions of the theories of the enhanced visual creativity of dyslexic brains, the citing of lists of dyslexic artists and athletes, and the recommended strategies to help dyslexic readers manage text, all of which appear as themes in *Stupid,* flirt dangerously with the medical model paradigm.

An academic response to this claim might point out that the relationship to the medical model within the disability studies community is complex, with disability studies scholars such as Shakespeare (2012) insisting on the right to discuss medicalized descriptions of impairment along with conversations of institutional barriers. In a similar vein Abrams (2014) has remarked: "The issue lies not in combating abstract biomedicine. I, like many other disabled persons, benefit from medical knowledge. We do not need to get rid of biomedicine. We need a free relation to it" (p. 131).

This concept of "free relation" reframes this concern as a potential strength of the novel: Firmston moves, with the grace of a Parkour practitioner, through medical, social, and aesthetic models of disability. Though she does not label these models, she portrays their intersections with a complexity that is startling given the simplicity of her prose. When asked why she writes

young adult fiction, the author remarked that as a dyslexic person she often finds it easier to read, as well as often of greater intensity and imaginative scope than many of the novels aimed primarily at adult audiences (Porras, 2016). The increasing recognition of the literary merit, even to adult audiences, of young adult fiction was recently highlighted by the recent Canadian Broadcast Corporation's *Canada Reads* contest's selection of another work that hauntingly addressed themes of exclusion / inclusion, *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* (2015). It is in this spirit that I maintain that, when it comes to disability studies, Kim Firmston's hi-low novel *Stupid,* is of high interest indeed.

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