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Bérubé, M. (2016). *The Secret Life of Stories: From Don Quixote to Harry Potter, How Understanding Intellectual Disability Transformed the Way We Read*. New York: New York University Press ISBN 978-1-4798-2361-1.

Reviewed by Chelsea Jones
Ryerson University
Chelsea.jones@ryerson.ca

In his second book that leads with intellectual disability,¹ Michael Bérubé once again begins at home with memories of reading to and with his now-adult sons, Nick and Jamie. It is Jamie who incidentally directs his father's attention to an ambiguous rippling of intellectual disability haunting the peripheries of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* plots. The result is an attempt to textualize disability—or more to the point, to textualize the ubiquitousness of disability in all stories, and its place in one of what Bérubé calls fiction's ancient prerogatives: “that of making stuff up” (2). Unfolding through this book is a warning against reductive readings of (intellectual) disability alongside an argument for finding fictional modes of intellectual disability as one piece of the larger, urgent projects gripping disability studies that involve negotiating relationships between bodies and minds, and re/imagining humanness.

In *The Secret Life of Stories: From Don Quixote to Harry Potter, How Understanding Intellectual Disability Transforms the Way We Read* we are invited into a generous pursuit of characters and texts whose connections to intellectual disability (and, secondarily, madness) offer opportunities to stray from linear, coherent planes of literary criticism and disability studies, thereby expanding the parameters of what emerges in stories when disability is nearby. Bérubé kicks off his critiques by making clear that disability studies has left intellectual disability “unmarked and unremarked” (28) in its work on representation. As he explains his

¹ See also: Bérubé's 1996 book, *Life as We Know It: A Father, a Family, and an Exceptional Child* (Pantheon Books).

determination “to cure disability studies of its habit of diagnosing fictional characters” (20) he organizes a reorientation toward intellectual disability in ways that motivate the writing and challenge the reading. In thinking through major questions of motive, time, and self-awareness (the categories that divide the book’s chapters), Bérubé hits on ways in which both literary criticism and disability studies have reinstated normalcy by scanning characters for disability diagnosis. He therefore directs us away from diagnostic reads that determine the limits of a character’s subjectivity (even when they are handed to us, as in Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*). Instead, he readjusts our readerly focus so we are leaning less on intellectually disabled characters *as* characters “than with the question of these characters’ relation(s) to narrative” (37). This means intellectual disability, as a cultural phenomenon, can operate even in the absence of intellectually disabled characters.

Bérubé challenges us to avoid falling for the usual disability chronotypes—for example, those characters who “haunt” narrative peripheries reminding readers “that they too, someday will be unable to tell a coherent story” (63). He cautions us against hastily taking disability in literature as stigmatizing, and suggests we instead think about disability in terms of narrative function. In other words, although our encounters with intellectually disabled characters in narrative urge disability studies scholars to take up text differently (often critically), key to Bérubé’s argument is that intellectual disability can be applied to narrative itself. And in turn, “intellectually disabled narrative opens a window onto a reimagining of the parameters of narrative, [and] so too does intellectually disabled self-consciousness open a window onto a reinterpretation of self-consciousness as such” (160).

Arguing that fiction is a flexible narrative space where intellectual disability can expand stories “beyond the boundaries of human experience all together,” Bérubé invites us to re-read

“made up” (85) disability that emerges in relation to the structure of the fiction it both drives and inhabits. He has no simple formula for gaining new perspective; non-linear narratives provoked by both intellectual disability and madness do not confine themselves to representational tropes disability studies has previously named. Here, Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell’s widely cited *narrative prosthesis* undergoes a detailed re-examination, making this book a must-read for disability studies scholars working with literature (alongside works by Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Maria Truchan-Tatryan, Jay Dolmage, James Berger, and others). Instead of relying on *narrative prosthesis* as a launching point for analysis, Bérubé suggests that “sometimes, it appears, the representation of disability involves no metarepresentation of the thing(s) the disability itself is understood to represent” (49). Bérubé cautions that *narrative prosthesis*’s formulaic story analysis doesn’t explain ambiguous depictions of disability in narrative. For Bérubé there is never any singular, always-already textual representation of disability. Each time we encounter a text, or a character, “they too will be slightly different, and so will you” (50).

That difference, of course, depends on whether we’ve encountered the text(s) at all. From James Cameron’s *Avatar* to Homer’s *Odyssey*, Bérubé offers a broad sampler of close readings to delight the average cine- and bibliophile. He is careful not to assume we’ve indulged in them all, offering descriptive backgrounders to books like Philip K. Dick’s *Martian Time-Slip* and even William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. Referring to Benjy’s inner thought process in *The Sound and the Fury*, Bérubé writes, “his emotions may be more inchoate, perhaps, than yours or mine..., but the difference is a matter of degree rather than kind” (82). The audience Bérubé addresses is a readership or erudite, scholarly readers who ought to have studiously encountered a polished tome of North American university-level literature, complete with a framework to understand the interpretive shortcomings of social constructivism, evocriticism,

metarepresentation, and other elite-knowledge concepts. Readers who might find themselves more closely aligned with team Potter than with team Quixote risk a rather dry, convoluted—and arguably inaccessible—read. Though (worth mentioning for the Harry Potter fans) Bérubé does disability studies a favour by bringing us into dialogue with the characters who may incidentally evade rational narrative and scholarly expectations (specifically Ariana Dumbledore). In doing so he is expanding our menu of valid literatures and demanding a reconceptualization of what we consider accessible text. In reference to his son, Jamie, Bérubé asks: “So Martha Nussbaum, in *Poetic Justice*, gets at [critical questions] by way of Charles Dickens, and Jamie Bérubé gets at [them] by way of J.K. Rowling—so what?” (9).

Through his own dissecting of texts (from *fabula* to *szujet*, he remarks), Bérubé spells out for us, as he does for his students, a worthwhile tip: paying attention to a breadth of texts and their details opens space for invested readings where “perhaps it becomes possible to see the value of, and even to become emotionally invested in, self-reflexive and metafictional renderings of intellectual disability” (165). Following his opening argument that we can read disability into a wide range of cultural texts—to the point where we may even read stories as intellectually disabled (75)—Bérubé helps us understand and encounter both texts and intellectual disability differently. Indeed, as readers, we are (too) often asked to guess at characters’ consciousness and rationality. In this guesswork we risk losing our imagination for characters’ unconsciousness and the signifiers that lay hidden in our normative imaginaries. In some ways, Bérubé is teaching us to de- and re-construct characters who are not only discovered as intellectually disabled, but whose sense of the narrative itself (the temporalities and space of the story) pervades the narrative’s structure. From understandings of time to verb tense, the crippled/mad/intellectually disabled narrative reformulates both the story and its reader.

The book closes with a return to its aim of “imagining other ways of being human” (116). What tumbles out of the final few pages of the text is—finally—a call for justice. Keenly aware that our understanding of intellectual disability in fiction has real, life-or-death consequences for disabled people, Bérubé draws up a blueprint argument that the divide between the intelligible and unintelligible world informs eugenic readings of texts and bodies that have historical and future consequence (166). Here, we witness Bérubé grapple with whether or not his literary criticism has any impact on public policy or social justice. For only a few short pages, Bérubé wonders about real world politics by connecting Steinbeck’s Lennie to the 2012 execution of an intellectually disabled prisoner in Texas, Marvin Wilson. Though many of his arguments against diagnosing fictional characters are directed at the discipline, it is perhaps in this brief, three-page nod to social justice that this text takes on its strongest disability studies tune.