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Dunn, P. A. (2015). *Disabling Characters: Representations of Disability in Young Adult Literature*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. ISBN 978-1-433-12622-2.

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Designed as a book for educators that challenges how dis/abilities are portrayed in novels and short stories, Patricia A. Dunn's *Disabling Characters: Representations of Disability in Young Adult Literature* offers an assessment of 14 stories for youth, some of which have been incorporated into middle and high school English curricula for over the past 30 years. Though this book is particularly useful for teachers, it also provides an accessible entry into the academic discipline of Disability Studies.

Dunn believes not only that novels and short stories can be instructive, but also that they can be helpful in breaking down some of the Othering dichotomies that limit accessibility at the societal level. Though fiction was once used to instruct readers in ways of morality, literature has been increasingly regarded as something that can be both entertaining and informative (Marsh, Meade, & Roediger, 2003; Neilson, 2002; Short, 1997; Walker, Ganea, & Gopnik, 2002). Drawing on Judith Fetterly (1978), whose argument in turn derives from the work of Adrienne Rich, Dunn emphasizes the importance of “re-reading” texts in order to disrupt or challenge normative understandings of dis/ability. Trained in applying literary, rhetorical, and critical theories to fiction as a Professor of English, the author sets out to explore the ways in which literature—as good as or flawed as they may be—function as cultural texts implying a particular understanding of disability that may be rooted in part in the time the piece was published.

In the introduction, the author locates herself as “a non-disabled ally of people with disabilities” (11) as of the writing of the book. She also identifies as temporarily able-bodied, understanding that she may require a more accessible environment later on in life. By positioning

herself within the narrative of the book, Dunn acknowledges that she may have particular biases that will impact how she interprets the material in the literature; this is consistent with how other researchers use positionality when they conduct qualitative research in areas such as race (Bourke, 2014). This tone is simultaneously straightforward and “approachable” for educators and students who may be engaging with dis/ability as an area of academic study for the first time.

Dunn goes to present five substantive chapters, each focusing on a particular theme around dis/ability. Chapter 1, “Agency, Rebellion, and Challenging the Status Quo,” compares the short story “The Acorn People” (1976) to the novel *Accidents of Nature* (2006) to unearth how disability is constructed as an us/them binary. She indicates that the two stories differ in how youth with dis/abilities are treated within a camp setting. *Accidents of Nature* depicts the campers as having agency over their lives, bodies, and decisions. In contrast, “The Acorn People,” the author explains, is told from the perspective of one of the camp counsellors, which positions the protagonist not only as a “saviour” of the dis/abled, but also as a benefactor of the camp experience. This dichotomous positioning of the two pieces asks the reader to centre the experiences and knowledges of people with dis/abilities over those of the non-disabled unlike what is common in saviour narratives (Brown, 2013; Cammarota, 2012).

A similar acknowledgement of the lack of understanding that many abled people have of dis/abled people is present in Chapter 2, “Respect, Etiquette, and the Drama of Rude Behaviour.” In this chapter, Dunn measures *The Dark Days of Hamburger Haplin* (2010) against *Five Flavors of Dumb* (2010) and *The Cardturner* (2010); these stories showcase the ways abled people equate physical dis/abilities with intellectual disabilities. *Dark Days* and *Five Flavors*, Dunn states, provide the reader with some understanding of the experiences of deaf people in a

hearing world through their respective deaf protagonists. In particular, she focuses on the fact that the narrators must be able to see lips in order to read them; *Dark Days* provides some of its dialogue in pieces, which shows what happens when the speaker's mouth is covered. The third book presented, *The Cardturner*, has an abled narrator and protagonist whose uncle is blind; here Dunn focuses on how secondary characters are portrayed as mean and ignorant in order for the reader to understand that these individuals are ableist in their actions and viewpoints. In this way, the author is pointing out the social and physical hegemonies that impact dis/abled people in their everyday lives.

Once again the idea of a binary between dis/abled and abled folks is explored in Chapter 3, "Awakening Stories: "The Scarlet Ibis" and *The Cay*," which offers a critical reading of the stories selected. Unlike the previously mentioned literature, both titles in this chapter—"The Scarlet Ibis" (1960) and *The Cay* (1969)—pathologize dis/ability in alarming ways. In the former, the narrator's dis/abled brother dies, while in the latter, the narrator's blindness is reversed. This according to Dunn may lead readers to believe that people with dis/abilities "should either get better or die" (73). Thus, the author argues, literature with this particular orientation to dis/ability reinforces troubling social values toward dis/abilities, rather than challenging them.

In Chapter 4, "Carving Out and Identity: *Peeling the Onion*, *Stoner and Spaz*, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*," Dunn considers how *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), *Peeling the Onion* (1996), and *Stoner and Spaz* (2002) depict youths with dis/abilities rejecting normative societal constructions of dis/ability. The protagonists of the three novels begin to accept their identities as dis/abled teens after thinking critically about societal mythologies surrounding dis/ability. Though the author includes some

discussion about race and racism in her analysis of *True Diary*, there is no direct discussion of colonialism and the impacts of Indigenous erasure on Spokane protagonist, Arnold. Moreover, since much of the curricular and popular culture understandings of Indigenous peoples in settler nations (i.e., the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) are still deeply problematic, settler colonial values and norms remain unchallenged. When matters of dis/ability and Indigeneity are considered in “real life” contexts this becomes clear. The ways in which settler colonial policies have legislated health care in Canada the United States, for example, has meant that Indigenous peoples are systemically denied access to care and/or the care received is sub-standard (Lawrence, 2002; Tang & Browne, 2008).

Finally, in a challenge to the idea of dis/ability is something to overcome, Chapter 5 “‘Normal’ Talents, Rudolph Stories, and ‘Supercrrips,’” compares four young adult mystery novels—*The London Eye Mystery* (2007), *Marcelo in the Real World* (2009), *From Charlie’s Point of View* (2005), and once again *The Dark Days of Hamburger Haplin* (2010)—to critically question the fine line that exists between positive representation and “inspiration porn.” Dunn believes that the four novels analyzed in this chapter rebuff some societal norms on dis/ability, while others are maintained, each to varying degrees. The author also takes the time (and space) in this chapter to point out the blatant misogyny in *From Charlie’s Point of View*, as well as *Stoner and Spaz* from Chapter 4. As the concluding chapter of the book, the reader is left with the impression that no (existing) piece of young adult literature where dis/ability is a major theme should be without criticism; in fact, being able to critically analyze the material will allow readers to better understand the ways in which ableism is overlooked in society and how to reject it.

Overall, *Disabling Characters: Representations of Disability in Young Adult Literature* does an excellent job problematizing the ways in which dis/ability is constructed in young adult fiction. In particular, her inclusion of the characters' sexuality and desires within the book was especially important since people with dis/abilities are often thought of as non-sexual beings (McRuer & Mollow, 2012; Rohleder & Swartz, 2012). As noted, the absence of discussion on Indigeneity in Chapter 5 is something that the author (and other authors) should not overlook in future work on *True Diary*. This notwithstanding, *Disabling Characters* operates as a great resource for educators and students who are looking to critically examine dis/ability in not only youth literature, but adult literature as well.

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