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## ***Canadian Journal of Disability Studies***

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**Review:** Truchan-Tataryn, Maria. *(In)visible Images: Seeing Disability in Canadian Literature, 1823-1974*. Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011. ISBN 978-3-8465-0472

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Maria Truchan-Tataryn's book, *(In)visible Images: Seeing Disability in Canadian Literature, 1823-1974*, is beautifully written and represents an original contribution to the discipline of English and Disability Studies. *Invisible Images* methodically pursues an analysis of the representations of disability in Canadian literature tracing the literary use of disability in eight Canadian-authored Anglophone novels written between the years 1823-1974. The analysis is impressively nuanced and addresses the rich complexity of disability insofar as the author reads disability as a product of, as well as a response to, the context of its appearance. This nuanced reading allows Truchan-Tataryn to critically discuss how disability is ambiguously positioned in Canadian social, historical and political scenes.

One of the most important (and impressive) qualities of *(In)Visible Images* is that disability becomes much more than a problem and more than a troubling condition in need of diagnosis. Truchan-Tataryn is not content with the practice of merely noting that disability does appear in Canadian literature and that this appearance is often a degraded one. Instead, Truchan-Tataryn's analysis brings the reader into relation with disability and human variation as a space where we might learn something new (192). She shows how the typically objectified and degraded symbol of disability can and should be read through a disability studies perspective. Her disability studies perspective entails reading disability always in relation to other characters in the novels and in relation to wider social contexts and other trajectories of meaning, and in these ways *(In)Visible Images* demonstrates how disability can be read as an agentive character

within literary scenes. For example, Truchan-Tataryn grapples with literary commentators' proclivity to treat disability as a mere symptom of, or metaphor for, a character's "deformed" inner state. She reads literary commentary in the same way that she reads disabled characters in the novels, that is, both are treated as part of an interpretive relation gesturing at the unexamined cultural assumptions from which they spring. Truchan-Tataryn shows how the meaning that is made manifest through disability extends beyond its expediency as a metaphor for oppression (70) or a "stock metaphor for deficit" (163). That is, the meaning of disability extends into relations that need to resist this oppression; into the uncertain nature of our interrelatedness in love, family and citizenry; into personal and social relations to vulnerability, ordinariness, fate, religion, nation; and ultimately extends into the question of the human condition insofar as the meaning of disability is situated between ourselves and others.

Truchan-Tataryn helps us to re-engage the stories that we may think we already know -- *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* or *Love and Salt Water*. Through her discussion of these eight novels, Truchan-Tataryn demonstrates that the images of disability, that could be dismissed as distasteful, can nonetheless be engaged to reveal more complex or hidden narratives. Her analysis of disability encourages a self-reflective reader who might embrace a desire-filled relation to more complicated depictions of embodiment. Whether as metaphor for living death, inadequate response, or a devalued state of being, Truchan-Tataryn finds more through an incisive and politically productive analysis that always locates the figure of disability as it interacts within a literary scene. She shows how any attention to the appearance of disability needs to also attend to the relations between self and other, relations that can hold even in the face of the most degrading depictions of humans we can imagine. In this way, *(In)Visible*

*Images* work exemplifies a key principle in disability studies scholarship – it begins from the need to regard disability as it exists between people.

Truchan-Tataryn shows how the Canadian context is reflected in the novels' disability depictions. She then shows how those depictions of disability which are “of” Canada are not “at one” with it. Some differences -- the differences of agentive response, of representing and speaking back to the “ways in which national communities read the bodies of their citizens” are thus actualized (202). Through this process of critical reading, Truchan-Tataryn opens up the possibility that all of us can learn something new about the contexts within which disability is forced or invited to make an appearance. Speaking from my interpretive sociological background, this move to grapple with the literary appearance of disability as a performance of meaning between the various characters located in particular narrative structures is as enjoyable as it is unique. This book represents a form of critical reading that makes disability manifest as a complex character that has something to say back to the scene(s) within which it appears. *(In)visible Images* offers an analysis that manages the complexity of disability as both object of, and subject in, a story from which there is always more to learn than stereotypes we likely already know.