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**Gimp Sue Gets the Girl: Disability in *Twilight* Fanfiction**

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**Abstract:** While many fan studies scholars have written about the Mary Sue through gender and sexuality, disability is often entirely overlooked. I take up this gap in scholarship in the following paper, looking at the various intersections between disability and *Twilight* fanfiction. I look closely at two Disabled!Twilight fanfics written by disabled authors—LisbethsGirlfriend's *Forgive Me for Loving You*, and *The Plasma's Coping with Change*. Through their respective fics, these disabled Mary Sues, or Gimp Sues, address issues of sex, disability, and coming out, questioning just who has the right to tell stories, and what stories get told.

**Keywords:** fanfiction; disability; gimp sue

**Gimp Sue Gets the Girl: Disability in *Twilight* Fanfiction**

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*This story may be unlike any other Twilight Saga story you have ever read before. Maybe that's good, maybe not, but keep in mind, this is just a story I thought up and I am not out to destroy what Stephenie Meyer has created. This particular OC in the story will be a disabled girl based on myself as I have cerebral palsy and have a longing to be with Bella Swan. If femslash is not your thing, I wouldn't pursue this any farther. Continue on if you dare.*

- A warning from LisbethsGirlfriend, *Forgive Me for Loving You*

In the epigraph above, the author, a fan of the *Twilight* series, cautions readers that what they are about to read involves a queer disabled Mary Sue living out her crip desires. If the reader chooses to proceed, fans are quickly exposed to LisbethsGirlfriend's deeply personal and fannish fantasies, as she explicitly writes herself into Stephenie Meyer's supernatural universe. Across the following pages, her writing becomes an act of both sexual and emotional reclamation of crip sexuality. In the space of two chapters, her 'Mary Sue' gets the girl of her dreams to fall in love with her, pushing canonical characters out of the way to make room for her non-canon Sue to explore a life she'll never quite have.

A Mary Sue is either a canon or original character (OC) written into a pre-existing universe, whose perfect set of traits seem entirely unbelievable. Mary Sues are often surrogates

of the authors themselves, tactlessly implanted into universes to live out personal fantasies with fictional characters, in fictional situations. Commanding disproportionate amounts of entirely unwarranted attention in relation to anyone else in the universe, plots revolve exclusively around the Mary Sue, with little-to-no regard on preserving the original characteristics of the universe they inhabit. Because of their self-gratifying behaviour, Mary Sues are viewed by some critics as badfic (bad fiction) and as poorly developed original characters. I argue that Mary Sues, specifically disabled Mary Sues, are powerful disruptive agents that challenge and resist narratives of compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality. By writing spaces for themselves in fandoms that canonically do not consider their bodies, or threaten to erase them, disabled Mary Sues offer a way for disabled characters and readers to have agency (and to sometimes have hot consensual sex too).

While many scholars have written about Mary Sue through the lenses of gender and sexuality, disability is often entirely overlooked (Willis; Bonnstetter; Lehtonen). This article brings a queer crip analysis to investigate the function of disabled Mary Sues, or "Gimp Sues" in the online world of Twilight fan fiction. I take up this gap in scholarship in the following sections, looking at the various intersections between disability and Twilight fanfiction. I begin by conducting a review of Mary Sues in both scholarship and fandom, arguing that authoring a Mary Sue troubles the intersections between critical distance and fannish attachment, repeatedly sending academic and fan spaces into crisis. Next, I give a brief overview of disability Twilight fics, broadly examining common tropes and problems found within the genre. Lastly, I look closely at two Disabled!Twilight fanfics written by disabled authors—LisbethsGirlfriend's *Forgive Me for Loving You* and The Plasma's *Coping with Change*.

Through their respective fics, these Gimp Sues address issues of sex, disability, and coming out, questioning just who has the right to tell stories, and what stories get told. In her work on sexuality and disability, Loree Erickson argues that "[b]ecause our bodies, identities, desires, and experiences have multiple meanings, we need multiple stories" (325). Likewise, Gimp Sues too tell their own stories, from positions that have long been ignored. And Gimp Sues give us multiple stories, not just versions of the same story. These stories also ask multiple questions: How to make disability sexy? How to create a legitimate future for disability, one that is accessible, political, valuable, and complex (Kafer 3)? How and when to come out as disabled? How to write stories that act as a platform for disability activism? And overall, how do we "crip up," or "autistic up," in order to find a way to tell these multiple stories, other sides of the same story, stories for us, by us and even stories against us (Benham and Kizer 78)? As authors of unauthorized derivative works, Gimp Sues perform a "crip appropriation" of fandoms, crippling canon to retell well-known or not so known stories from their own positions, on their own terms (McRuer). Deviating from canon, these Gimp Sues write disability inclusive stories, stories that imagine disability meaningfully into the future. In these queer stories, the Gimp Sue gets the girl.

Both critical disability studies and fan studies are relatively new, emerging, and often overlooked fields within scholarship. Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (1992) first opened up the possibility for fandom to enter into an academic context, examining fan culture's participatory and community-based practices of production. Since then, fan-led organizations such as *Archive of Our Own* (AO3), *FanFiction.Net* (FFN), and *LiveJournal* (LJ) have furthered the development of fan scholarship. As an interdisciplinary field, fan studies examines a wide range of fan practices and fan works, including fan art, fan conventions, vidding, and fan fiction.

Fan scholarship is particularly interested in the queer sexual practices of fans. Academic discussions generally focus on heterosexual women writing slash fanfiction (same-sex pairings, usually male) or fans producing archives of homoerotic fan art (Scodari; Woledge; Dennis). Through their slash pairings, fans are free to explore the emotional and sexual possibilities of their favourite characters, constructing and developing their identity alongside their queer ships (relationships). Christine Scodari argues that this queer labour, in certain circumstances, ends up reinforcing hegemonic attitudes, as initially emancipatory activities turn misogynistic or homophobic. As fandom moves forward, fans need to be careful not to reinforce these oppressive frameworks.

Critical disability studies too is interested in the treatment of sexuality, as crip labour works to undo systemic ableism and systems of privilege. Because of ableist attitudes, disabled people have trouble gaining access to sex education, sex partners, sex aids, contraceptives, and sexual inclusion (Wilkerson). For these victims of sexual gatekeeping then, sexual citizenship or participation in sexual culture is largely restricted or denied. These barriers discourage disabled people from having any sort of sex life, redirecting sexual desire to friendship or shaming individuals that exercise or explore their sexuality. Discussing the history of sexual shame and disabled bodies, Erickson explains that, "we learn to associate shame with sex" and that this shame is "used not only as a tool of social control to isolate us from each other, but to keep us from accessing those very parts of ourselves, our bodies, our desires and our experiences" (4-5). For disabled scholar Eli Clare, gawking, flirting, and flaunting his points of shame become acts of resistance and pride, taking back control as his body limps, slurs, and shakes down the street in defiance. Erikson too reclaims and appropriates these oppressive and abusive systems, the walk of shame instead becoming a crip walk of pride. Overall, there is very little literature that

takes up critical disability studies and fan studies together. By placing disability in a fan context then, a crip fan position helps to reveal latent ableism in the fan community.

### **Suethors and their Sues**

Scholars and fans hate Mary Sues (and the "Suethors" that author them). A common critique is that she is too emotionally immature and sexually self-indulgent to be taken seriously (Bacon-Smith, Driscoll) Yet Henry Jenkins points out that all fans, to a certain extent, "work to efface the gap that separates the realm of their own experience and the fictional" (171). If, as Jenkins claims, this effacement is a fundamental feature of fandom, then how might we come to understand the fan's community complete rejection of Mary? Putting Suethors and Sues in close proximity arguably sets up a crisis in the fan community, as life writing and fan writing collapse onto one another. Suethors' push at this failing system, as "autobiographical intent" and heavy-handed self-inserts threaten to undo fanon, unsettling how fans participate, construct, and archive their new texts (Jenkins 173).

Some scholars have come to Mary Sues defense, choosing to see Mary from a different side. Often, these scholars write through their own Sue-ish fanfic, performing their fanfics in an attempt to navigate academic discourse and their own fan writing practices. Ika Willis explains that making space for her Mary Sue at Hogwarts is "a way for making space in canon for [her] own subjectivity" (10). Beth Bonnstetter performs her Trekkie Mary Sue Vanessa "as well as other Mary Sue identities ... [to deal] with problems in [her] life, such as change, loneliness, boredom, and stress" (357). As aca-fans (academic fans), Mary Sues provide a form to challenge what legitimate forms of fannish and academic labor and authorship look like. As aca-fans and self-outed Suethors, Willis and Bonnstetter trouble both academic and fannish demands for

critical distance, calling for the need to recognize the valuable intersections and disruptions between both positions. Willis and Bonnstetter confess an attraction to their Sues, admitting that this closeness validates and pulls out latent identities and desires in not only themselves but also the texts they work through. At a crossroads then, fans and aca-fans are faced with the difficult task of negotiating fan identification with their own personal validation.

Suethors aside, successful self-inserts rework their emotional investment into a critically distant intimacy. For instance, Kristina Busse looks beyond the Mary Sue at how fans represent themselves and their communities through different fannish practices and forums. Busse recognizes that "fans are often torn between not wanting to self-insert while also not wanting to be completely left out" (162). In an attempt to get around the dreaded Mary Sue label then, fans hijack certain canon characters that serve as easy stand-ins for fans or entry points into their favourite fictional universes, allowing both author and fan to project and work through their own personal and fannish experiences relatively undetected. Busse pushes at this crisis, between lived and the virtual desires, in order to unpack the many definitions and disputes about Mary Sues and move forward. As an aca-fan, I too push this crisis along in order to expand scholarly and fannish understanding of the Mary Sue by inserting disability into the discussion, crippling these systems and looking for an alternate future for Mary.

Mary Sue fanfic is "the most universally denigrated genre in the entire canon of fan fiction" (Bacon-Smith, 350). Indeed, the fan community explicitly works against the Mary Sue, instructing other fans on how to either save Mary from herself, or how to get rid of her altogether (see articles like "The Trouble with Mary," "Saving Mary Sue," or "Killing a Mary-Sue (Before She Kills Your Story)"). For example, the FanFiction.Net group, The Anti-Cliché and Mary-Sue Elimination Society, are dedicated to identifying and putting an end to Mary Sues. Mary Sues



are continuously "outed" by other fans, their stories listed as targets for flaming. There is even a test for writers to take, The Original Fiction Mary-Sue Litmus Test, to see if their character tests positive as a Mary Sue:

- + Are one or more other characters attracted to her/him? [1 point]
- + Even though they are involved with someone else? [1 point]
- + In defiance of sexual orientation? [4 points]
- + Does the character get a disproportionate amount of physical description compared to the rest of the characters? [2 points]
- + Is the character of above average intelligence? [1 point]
  - + Is she/he a genius? [1 points]

In "How to Kill a Mary Sue," Encyclopedia Dramatica (ED) claims that the "only way to free the Internet from a Mary Sue is to attack the author directly. This can be done by drawing hate art of the Sue/Suethor or writing fanfics of your own with their Sue. Get creative, either have really f\*\*\*ed up things happen to the Sue or simply expose her for the unoriginal, pretentious character she is." Encyclopedia Dramatica as well recommends that fans document successful attacks removing Suethors and their Sues from the Internet, urging them to post screenshots on the site as a way of archiving their victories.

These strategies targeting Mary Sues and their authors demonstrate that Mary Sues are seen in the fanfic community as threats to good writing. Fans aim to make sure that Mary has no place in canon, calling for her removal or erasure. Suethors too are at risk, as flammers sometimes expose personal information about the author, placing their personal lives under fire. Flaming is arguably then an act of abuse towards the author. Yet Suethors continue to fight for a place to express their own realities, writing themselves into alternate universes—their relentless self-

representation itself an act of resilience and defiance. As well, Suethors continue to violate and resist stories that have ignored them, refusing to be cut out of and off from canon. As survivors of fannish abuse, Mary Sues are worth fighting for, as their very presence perpetuates the crisis between life writing and fan writing in fandom further.

The Mary Sue takes several forms, from 'Canon Sue' to 'Evil Sue', but the 'Gimp Sue' is particularly interesting as a figure of both denigration and resistance. Gimp Sues are Sues with a range of cognitive, developmental, intellectual, mental, physical, or sensory disabilities. According to Encyclopedia Dramatica, their disability warrants "the sympathy of all good guys, yet it doesn't make [Mary] any less attractive to the reader" ("Gimp Sue"). As well, Gimp Sues are loved "out of pity, since failure to do so would be discriminatory." As doubly illegitimate and undesirable labour and product, Gimp Sues must put up with the policing of not only their writing, but their bodies too. Gimp Sues are listed as a derogatory sub-category of their own, and often flamed into the open. Taking back this ableist term, I argue throughout that Gimp Sues disrupt and re-write ableist and heteronormative narratives as crip queer ones.

### **What's the Matter with Mary?: Disability in *Twilight* Fanfiction**

From canon disabled characters to canon non-disabled characters "crippled" in fanon, and from alternate universes (AU) to original characters (OC), the fanfiction community loves to write disability fic. In the *Twilight* fandom, for instance, Paralyzed!Bella, Deaf!Edward, and Epileptic!Jasper tell their own disability inclusive (and not so inclusive) stories. By inserting disability into the narrative, fans revise, reject, and retell Stephenie Meyer's original story. Through these fannish alterations, Meyer's characters now either are born disabled or they acquire disabilities. In sherryola's AU fanfic *Seeing Bella*, Bella Swan is born blind. Like the

original *Twilight*, the story opens with Bella returning to Forks to live with her dad Charlie Swan. Over the course of 50 chapters, Bella navigates ableism in her town, falls in love with Edward Cullen, and becomes a vampire, eventually gaining sight after her transformation. sherryola explains that she wrote the story because she wanted to explore "what would happen to a totally blind person who became a vampire, and how they would deal with the results" (ch. 50). As well, in her author's notes, sherryola discloses to readers that, like Bella, she too is blind and that, "the opinions expressed by Bella in this story, as well as the alternative techniques she uses in her life, are all my opinions and the techniques I use everyday. From time to time, I will provide links to sites where the readers can learn more" (ch. 1). After every few chapters, sherryola does, in fact, provide educational links to official organizations for blind people, along with other personal fic recommendations.

Alby Mangroves' *In Braille*, another Blind!Bella fanfic, is less concerned about disabled activism—or even accuracy. Bella's visual impairment is used instead as a romantic opportunity, as Bella reads Edward's body "in braille" in a hospital cafeteria. In Blonde K's *Bella in a Wheelchair*, Bella has an acquired disability from a car accident. Arriving in Forks after the accident, Bella must now adjust to a new school, new town, and new life in a wheelchair. Admittedly, *Bella in a Wheelchair* slides into ableist territories and readers reviewing Blonde K's fic are fairly divided in their responses to this nondisabled author who is writing about disability. Some readers offer Blonde K assistance in getting disabled representation right, while others don't have a problem with the story. Critical of Blonde K's representation of disability, Poli yutref writes, "[a]nother stereotypical story where the person is made fun of because of their disability and cannot be independent. It started off good but I was disappointed." Blonde K never directly responds to such critiques, as writers may choose to

ignore or follow advice offered by their readers or delete reviews entirely that do not align with their direction.

Oddly, very few disability fics take up Stephanie Meyer's only canon disabled character, diabetic wheelchair user Billy Black. Typically, writers choose to explore Billy Black's relationship with Charlie Swan, rather than exploring his disability further. These fics often slash Billy with Charlie, setting up rather confusingly incorrect gay wheelchair porn.<sup>1</sup> Other fanfics choose to return to the period before Billy acquires his disability, as Billy spends the day fishing and hanging out with Charlie—without his wheelchair. But ditching Billy's wheelchair also means erasing his disability. As a less popular character, fans problematically overlook Billy, favouring stories about non-canon disabled characters instead. Many disabled!fics privilege certain disabilities over others, producing a hierarchy of desired impairments. Out of the hundreds of thousands of fanfics, for example, fics about lupus, Crohn's Disease, or diabetes are incredibly hard to find. Fics are more likely to feature autistic, paraplegic, or deaf characters.

Currently, there are around 219,000 *Twilight* fanfics on FanFiction.Net (FFN) alone. Fans write missing chapters, alternate perspectives, and untold endings.<sup>2</sup> Some stories make significant revisions to the source text, while others offer small fixes. Fans additionally decide what is important and what stays in fanon, archiving events that were never originally recorded, lost to history and its silences. It is also common for major (and minor) fandoms to have their own dedicated fanfiction fan sites, sites that are run and maintained by fans, for fans. For instance, Twi-fans can access *Twilight* specific content vetted by moderators on sites like

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<sup>1</sup> See AngleFangz's lemon one-shot "Shimmering New Horizons" or Mz. Bellahater's pre-disability Billy/Charlie fic "Second Chances."

<sup>2</sup> Like her fans, Stephenie Meyer was also rewriting the first novel in her *Twilight* series from Edward's perspective, *Midnight Sun*. Sadly, Meyer's left *Midnight Sun* unfinished after parts of the story were leaked to the public. The first 12 chapters are currently available to read for free on her website: <http://stepheniemeyer.com/project/midnight-sun/>. Meyer did, however, successfully publish a gender-swapped version of *Twilight* in 2015 in celebration of *Twilight's* tenth anniversary, *Life and Death: Twilight Reimagined*.

twilighted.net, TwiFanfictionRecs.com, or Twilight Saga Wiki.

Of all the *Twilight* fanfics on FanFiction.Net, only a small percentage discusses disability. Unfortunately, FanFiction.Net does not have a freeform tagging system, unlike another popular fanfic site Archive of Our Own (AO3), instead reducing tags to more general search filters like series, pairings, and characters. This makes it difficult to get a clear sample size. Readers must instead enter in specific search terms in order to browse for specific disabilities, calling up fics that have the term included somewhere in their plot summaries or title. For instance, 59 stories include the term "disability," 37 "wheelchair," 33 "autism," and 86 "deaf." The Twi-fan run site TwiFanFictionRecs sorts disability more clearly. The site carefully indexes fanfics by genre, point of view, rating, or by character (limited here to Bella or Edward). Disability/Disorder is listed as its own genre, further sorted by popular disabilities such as "PTSD", "autism", "deaf", "cerebral palsy", and "paraplegia." Readers can also select fanfics filed under Disabledella, alongside a selection of other Cinderella-like categories. As a fansite, TwiFanfictionRecs does not have a searchable database. A manual count puts the number of disability fanfics at approximately 79 of the 1767 fics featured on the fansite. Of the fanfics cited above, disabled Mary Sues make up an even smaller proportion of the overall count. Considering that Mary Sues run the risk of being pushed out of fanfic entirely, very few authors openly advertise their Sues in their disclaimers or author's notes (A/N), let alone their disabilities.

After conducting a manual search, I have narrowed down my reading to two Mary Sue disabled! *Twilight* fanfics from FanFiction.Net—LisbethsGirlfriend's *Forgive Me for Loving You* and The Plasma's *Coping with Change*.<sup>3</sup> I have selected these two fanfics for several reasons.

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<sup>3</sup> For further Gimp Sue reading outside of the Twilight fandom, see fanfic writer Butterfly Hippie on FanFiction.Net.

First, both authors not only come out as disabled in their disclaimers, but also openly out their Mary Sues. Since FFN users select avatars and usernames to protect their privacy, explicitly disclosing their Gimp Sue in their opening address removes any uncertainty about the authors' intentions, clearly sorting their fics into the Gimp Sue genre. Second, these particular fanfics do not attempt to cure disability or recover from it, a common trope in disability fanfic, and instead choose to tell stories about ordinary disabled lives. The selected fics also feature two of the more popular disabilities in fandom, cerebral palsy (CP) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD), potentially drawing in more readers, compared to fics featuring less popular or less well-known disabilities. Finally, both fanfics are narrated by Bella Swan, like the original story. One fanfic is femme-slash (female-female pairing) and the other is het (heterosexual pairing). They are not contest winners or nominated for awards. One story has 15 reviews, the other 345. But both stories are well received by their respective reviewers—they are Mary Sue success stories.

**“She may be disabled, but she is beautiful”: Getting to the Heart of the Gimp Sue**

In what follows, I take a closer look at LisbethsGirlfriend's *Twilight* fanfic *Forgive Me for Loving You*, quoted at the beginning of this article. In the fanfic, LisbethsGirlfriend directly inserts herself into the *Twilight* universe as the OC Effy in order to romance the canon character Bella Swan. Effy enters into fanon as the new girl in town, echoing Bella's return to Forks in the original series and, to some extent, taking her place. Yet Bella is retained as narrator and the fanfic maintains her point of view throughout the story, perhaps to provide some distance from Effy's Sueish intentions.

It is useful here to pause and consider Alison Kafer's concepts of crip futurity and crip time, working through Kafer's question, "How might disability affect one's orientation to time?"

(26). If, as Kafer suggests, crip time is not just about the need for extra time but also about the need for flexibility, for reorientation, in order to disrupt expectations surrounding compulsory able-bodiedness, then how might we come to understand Effy? Effy's "lifelong" disability might serve as a useful starting point. Cerebral palsy is a permanent neurological disability that affects mobility and muscle coordination. Like most disabilities, impairments vary from person to person. In Effy's case, continuous muscle contractions, or spasms, make activities like walking, sitting, or getting dressed difficult and they typically require more time. Effy's spastic body then is a body that moves too much, a body out of control, and a body in excess. Wheelchairs, straps, and forearm crutches attempt to control and mediate this excess. Yet, in the fanfic, this excess directly puts everything in motion. Operating on crip time then, *LisbethsGirlfriend* manipulates and shifts Meyer's source text around to arrive at different points of desire. This temporal intervention arguably allows the story to progress according to Effy's pace, as *LisbethsGirlfriend* bends both canon and the clock to be with Bella.

In an accelerated timeline of events, Bella and Effy meet immediately at Forks High School and become friends. The two first meet in the school cafeteria, spending the lunch hour talking and sharing personal details about their lives. As the bell rings, Effy looks down at her wheelchair, admitting to Bella that she will be "late for class again" (Ch. 1). Yet Effy's acknowledged failure to arrive on schedule precipitates their first romantic opportunity, as Bella offers to push her to her next class. Needing more time works in Effy's favour here, her disability granting the girls more time together. As Bella takes hold of her wheelchair, Effy too makes her own offer, asking Bella to help her get changed before gym. This request quickly sets up a scene where the two consensually take pleasure in watching and helping one another get undressed:

*I bent down to unhook her ankles and her legs stretched in the joy of freedom from the confines of imprisonment for hours. She placed her feet to the ground and reached out to grab my waist as I stood back up.*

*The air left my lungs in a gasp as she held me and pulled herself to her feet. I closed my eyes lightly as my chin rested on her head for a moment before my fingers slid to her waist, careful to keep our balance as I popped the button on the denim fabric she was wearing. I effortlessly pulled them down and helped her step out of the pile around her feet. I moved to reach her shorts and then kneeled down to help her step into them, momentarily face-to-face with her sheer, red, matching panties. (ch. 2)*

Unhooking Effy's ankles from her wheelchair straps becomes an extremely erotic moment between them. Hips are used for leverage, out of necessity and pleasure. Asking for help on her own terms allows Effy agency, and asks readers to reconsider and re-evaluate what dependence and disability look like. Requiring support and care does not limit or desexualize Effy, but rather these daily acts of care have the potential to become subversively pleasurable, slipping between platonic and intimate contact. There is also very little urgency during this scene, as the girls leisurely enjoy the chance to be alone together in the changing rooms, slowly experiencing one another's bodies. Directly after this scene, Effy comes out to Bella as a lesbian, setting up the events of the second—and final—chapter.

In the fanfic, Edward is noticeably jealous of the relationship developing between the two women. Significantly, his concerns are less about sexual orientation than they are about Effy's disability. But what Edward seems to be the most upset about is that Bella's body physically reacts to Effy's disabled body, questioning the desire one could feel for "that kind of body." In an attempt to remind her of his control over her body, Edward forces himself on Bella. This



attack reinforces both compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness, and nears sexual assault. And, although *LisbethsGirlfriend* unsettles canon with her Mary Sue, her representation of Edward remains true to the original. Scholars such as Kane and Platt have critiqued canon Edward's abusive and controlling sexual politics, and, in turn, have called out Stephanie Meyer for her precarious positioning of female sexuality. This is particularly problematic considering Meyers influence over her almost exclusive female readership. With the insertion of Effy into the Twilight universe, Effy offers Bella a different choice, and a different story. Of course, Effy does not fit well into Edward's—or indeed Meyer's—heteronormative and able-bodied values. As both a queer and disabled body, Effy must write a way around the history of stigma, control, and sexual gatekeeping that comes with her embodiment.

Yet attempting to police and prevent Bella from acting on and acting out her own sexual desires does not exactly work here. In *LisbethsGirlfriend's* version, Bella forcefully rejects Edward's sexual advances, and this rejection is quickly followed by Effy's well-timed appearance at Bella's door, giving Bella the choice to instead give herself over to Effy—echoing the importance of the chapter's title "Invitation Only." Edward and Effy swap places (Effy enters, Edward leaves) and the two girls make their way up to Bella's bedroom. Effy leaves her forearm crutches at the bottom of the stairs, opening up yet another opportunity for consensual physical contact. Intending to keep Effy on balance, Bella places her hands around Effy's waist as the two slowly climb the stairs together. As they reach the top, the girls lose their footing and stumble onto Bella's bed. Effy lands on top of Bella, prompting a heated kiss. With this kiss, Bella realizes that the two have fallen in love. It's the end of the second chapter—Effy moves fast. Regrettably, the story never moves past the second chapter and readers are left wondering,

"Will this ever be updated?" (Guest). As an incomplete story, Bella and Effy's relationship remains unconsummated, but somehow, it already feels like Effy has gotten laid. Despite this premature conclusion, *Forgive Me For Loving You* comes very close to porn, receiving an M rating for its mature themes.

As a sexually mature fanfic, LisbethsGirlfriend directly challenges ableist assumptions about sex and disability. Disabled people are still fighting for the basic right to express their sexuality, their bodies instead continually medicalized, fetishized, desexualized or deemed inappropriate. Sex, then, is radically political. Robert McRuer asks, "[b]ut what if disability were sexy? What if disabled people were understood to be both subjects and objects of a multiplicity of erotic desires and pleasures?" (1). Eli Clare calls for queer crips to come out, writing that, "[n]ever are we seen, heard, believed to be the creators of our own desires, our own passions, our own sexual selves [...] time for us to talk sex, be sex, wear sex, relish our sex, both the sex we do have and the sex we want to be having."

Falling in line with McRuer and Clare, I wish to recover Gimp Sues from the margins, making room for their fannish disabled identities online. Disabled sexuality arguably opens up new and queerer forms and practices of sexual expression that disrupt compulsory heteronormativity and able-bodiedness. Working to create their own crip canon, Gimp Sues write their bodies and their desires into circulation, from slash to het to gen fanfic, combining their writing practices with their sexual practices. Through their erotic fanfics, Gimp Sues demand access to sexual expression and experience. Going off script, Gimp Sues also find a new language to voice their concerns, a language that is radically queer, radically crip, and entirely masturbatory. Through her Gimp Sue, LisbethsGirlfriend talks almost exclusively about sex, sexual desire, and the kind of sex she wants to be having. From erotic to sexually explicit

scenes, Effy knows that she is desirable. She makes disability sexy. It is also important to note that Effy's wheelchair, crutches, and limp do not just fade away in the story. Rather, they inform Effy's sexual interactions with Bella. Hips are leveraged. Wheelchair straps hold legs in place. Forearm crutches (in)directly facilitate a kiss. Mobility aids offer not just support, but in many ways, drive the romance forward, becoming queer sites of pleasure. Overall, *LisbethsGirlfriend* chooses to tell an entirely different version of *Twilight*—a story that is right for her—a story about sex, disability, and consent.

As Juli Parrish suggests "in the vast majority of fanfics, 'choosing the right story' means choosing Edward and, ultimately, choosing a version of Meyer's basic plot arc. In these stories, the right story Bella chooses is not an *alternative* story but a *better* version of the *same* story" (184). I doubt that *LisbethsGirlfriend* would have ended her story with Bella and Edward together. As an OC Mary Sue, Effy would have certainly gotten the girl in the end. Effy's "longing to be with Bella Swan" would displace Edward, excising him from canon in the final chapters as he retreats somewhere into the background. Indeed, at the beginning of the story, *LisbethsGirlfriend* states outright that she is "not out to destroy what Stephenie Meyer has created," but by the end, I'm no longer sure—destroy, maybe not; disrupt, certainly yes. Of the handful of reviewers, most seem to switch sides from Team Edward to Team Effy.

The Plasma's *Coping with Change* is another, arguably better, version of the same story. Taking up the canonical female protagonist Bella, The Plasma rewrites the entire first book in the *Twilight* series, completely retelling the story from their own perspective—from an autistic point of view:

*Bella has Asperger syndrome (A.S), a form of autism, and she is forced to move to Forks to live with her father while her mother is traveling with her step-dad, while in Forks she must deal with a new environment, a new routine, new people, and new feelings. (ch. 1)*

For the most part, *Coping with Change* closely follows the original narrative arc of *Twilight*. Few changes are made to the beginning and end of the story, but The Plasma does depart every so often from Meyer's version, a departure that takes the story in a few new directions. Written serially over the course of almost five years, *Coping with Change* totals twenty-six chapters plus an epilogue.<sup>4</sup>

The Plasma is less interested in the romantic arc of the narrative than *LisbestsGirlfriend*. By following canon, Bella is sure to 'get the guy' in the end. Instead, The Plasma wants readers to *get* their girl, Bella, by understanding what it means to be an autistic person. At the beginning of the fic, The Plasma reaches out to their readers, letting them know that, "[i]f you don't understand something (A common reaction for a non A.S. person in an A.S. conversation), please ask me, I can explain, I'll try at least, I can't promise that you will understand ME" (ch. 1). The Plasma recognizes that readers might not understand them, as an autistic author, let alone an autistic version of Bella. But many of the readers do, in fact, want to know more about autism, asking their questions in the review section. Some readers identify as being on the spectrum themselves, while others have children, extended family, or friends that they wish to understand better: "My daughter has A.S.. I will be very interested to see how A.S. Bella views the twilight world and maybe get a little bit of insight into my daughter's world also" (cullensrule). The Plasma spends the beginning of each chapter thanking readers and answering their questions, taking the time to further explain their perspective, diagnosis, and experiences. Their comments

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<sup>4</sup> The Plasma originally planned to rewrite each book in the *Twilight* series, but abandoned this idea once completing the fic—their first and final fanfic.

range from general gratitude to readers interested in the story and in autism, to more personal elaborations on stims, anxiety, routines, and relationships:

*Thank you, I try my best at portraying Bella right, it's not hard at all really, I thought it would be, but Asperger syndrome is first nature to me, sometimes even before eating, drinking and sleeping. I'm glad I can help spread the awareness. (ch. 3)*

After responding to reviewers, The Plasma briefly outlines the direction of the next chapter. Each chapter also ends with a few closing statements from the author—usually apologetic in tone—promising to do better in the next instalment: “I personally am disappointed in this chapter, not enough anxiety” (ch. 3). These paratexts offer The Plasma a chance to extend their voice even further, providing additional personal information and prompting discussion through not only their fic, but also through their disclaimers, author’s notes, summaries, and responses to reviewers. These rather messy attachments call to mind Benham and Kizer’s demand to “autistic up,” as The Plasma continuously speaks over and interrupts themselves, refusing to stay put inside the margins or to tell their story linearly. The Plasma also uses the story as a teaching tool, providing an accessible and interpersonal framework for readers to learn more about autism.<sup>5</sup>

The Plasma makes significant changes to the source text in order to write a story that is on the spectrum. For instance, the story still follows the development of Bella and Edward’s relationship, but with many new departures. For example, most of their conversations are either about Bella becoming a vampire, or about her being autistic. Sexual desire is also largely deferred, replaced instead by an initial desire for other forms of contact like verbal

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<sup>5</sup> The fanfic has even been translated into Spanish by another reviewer, further opening up its readership. The translated edition, “Lidiando con el cambio y el amor,” includes 14 of the original 27 chapters. To date, the translated edition has received a total of 125 reviews.

communication. This is not to suggest that Bella's sexual expression is omitted completely from the story, but rather suggests that her sexuality is expressed instead through atypical practices and forms. Discussing sexuality on the spectrum, Rachel Roner argues that, for the most part, "autistic sexuality is illegible to heteronormativity" (Roner 265). Indeed, Bella acknowledges this illegibility as she struggles to display her love for Edward in a form that he will understand: "I always enjoyed the idea of closeness, cuddling, I hope to be able to do it someday" (epilogue). This hope is not to become 'normal' in the future, but is instead a hope to find a way to mutually connect with her partner in a language that they both recognize. Jacob Black is also entirely absent from the story, and for good reason: Bella's social anxiety removes almost all possibilities of socializing beyond her regular routine, declining almost all social invitations. Instead, Bella goes to and from school, talks to Edward, stays home, and never meets Jacob. This erasure of romantic choice again departs from Meyer's version, simplifying Meyer's plot and opens up spaces for new plotlines. With Jacob gone, Edward is left as the only romantic option. Edward is also Bella's first, and presumably, last boyfriend.

As a coming out narrative, *Coping with Change* addresses issues of privacy, disclosure, and passing. Upon first meeting, Bella suspects that Edward might also be autistic, and though this thought is quickly shelved, she still notices that there is something different about him. Like the original story, she is determined to find out his secret. Her suspicions soon lead her to believe that Edward is a vampire, eventually forcing him to confirm her theory. But Bella has a secret of her own. Here then, Edward's secret intersects with Bella's: his vampirism, and her autism. Forcing Edward to out himself later parallels her own problem: how to come out to Edward. This is arguably the most significant departure from Meyer's story, shifting the conflict from a supernatural romance to a more complex discussion about disability. The Plasma also

hints that Bella's disability is perhaps the reason why Edward can't read her mind: her neurodivergence blocks Edward's telepathy. His inability to read her mind reflects both the real difficulty in bridging neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals, and suggests that Bella's autism acts as a kind of special ability.

Special ability aside, Bella has never had to tell anyone that she is autistic or seen a reason to—again prompting the main conflict of the fanfic. The first person she tells is Alice, Edward's sister, after Bella has a meltdown when the two go shopping for the day, necessitating an explanation for her behaviour. With this new knowledge, Alice urges Bella to tell Edward her secret. In the source text, Alice does not play a large role in Bella's day-to-day life, but here a friendship with Alice is more thoroughly explored in order to set up the main conflict. It is also important to point out that, for the most part, Bella passes as neurotypical—just as Edward passes as human. Indeed, nothing about Bella openly signals that there is anything different about her. Struggling with both the benefits and challenges in revealing her secret, Bella does eventually decide to tell Edward. With this new knowledge, Edward wants to learn as much as he can about autism and how her mind works. As a neurotypical partner, Edward puts in a lot of effort to understand things from Bella's perspective. Edward also largely acts as a proxy for clueless readers, asking Bella about what it's like to be autistic: "When were you diagnosed? How has it affected you? Does it bother you?" (ch. 21). In response, Bella explains that: "It's made me who I am [...] I never want to be normal" (ch. 21). Never wanting to be normal, then, means rejecting pressures to behave neurotypically, advocating instead for identities on the spectrum.

### **Full Disclosure: Disabled and Out Online**

Some fans have pointed out that Stephanie Meyer's Bella might already be autistic, but most remain divided on the topic (see AW; Tigris; Lucifuge Rofacale). Truthfully, Bella doesn't seem at all that different in The Plasma's version from the original text. Autistic Bella is strangely similar to canon Bella. For example, both Bella's enjoy being alone, experience difficulty communicating with others, experience anxiety, and are completely disinterested in their physical appearance. Certainly, people off the spectrum can display these characteristics and experience some degree of overlap with autistic people. Since Meyers has yet to personally confirm these fannish speculations, fans cannot truly claim canon Bella as autistic. Of course, outing characters as disabled and claiming them as *crip* comes with its own problems. Forcing a character out of the closet and into a community they might have never asked for could easily become an act of violence (see Cooley and Harrison). Diagnosing fictional characters also arguably becomes dangerous territory. For one, outing, claiming, and diagnosing places the character at risk of pathologizing or victimization by other fans, limiting or restricting their disabled identities. Certainly, it is difficult to navigate these complex situations and the boundaries between the three are not always so clear. How then can we safely (and valuably) disconnect claiming from outing? How can we avoid making an act of resistance into an act of violence? How are disabled identities shaped by staying in the closet, coming out, or selective disclosure?

It is also important to recognize the different lived experiences between visible and nonvisible disabilities. For instance, unlike Effy, a visibly disabled character, Bella's autism largely goes unnoticed. Passing as nondisabled allows Bella to navigate through life without much of the stigma attached to other disabled bodies. But passing comes with its own pressures—the pressure of meeting different social expectations. Throughout the fic, Bella



constantly reminds herself to bathe regularly, make eye contact, and keep her stims and meltdowns to a minimum. Asking for help or accommodation also poses its own set of issues. Since Bella's disability is not written clearly on her body in the same way as Effy's, a different kind of labour needs to be performed in order to ask for accommodation. Arguably, people with nonvisible disabilities are often met with significant discrimination or suspicion, their failure to present as disabled or "not disabled enough" often coming at the cost of accommodation or access to benefits for their impairments (see Samuels). To a certain extent, this failure places them under constant surveillance, as they make claims to disabled spaces and resources. Demonstrating or convincing others that her impairment exists proves exhausting for Bella, as she selectively comes out first to Alice, then to Edward, and later to his family. Suspicion even extends into the reviews section as readers challenge Bella's (and even The Plasma's) disability: "I have two handicapped siblings and this is NOT aspergers syndrome" (spunkransomeloverr).

The visibility of Effy's disability affords her different kinds of privileges and problems. For instance, her wheelchair, forearm crutches and limp visually code her body as disabled. As a result, her visibility draws attention to her body, allowing others to quickly reject, accept, or accommodate her. Upon her arrival at Forks high school, Jessica Stanley immediately brands Effy as "a total freak" who "can't even walk right" and as "a pathetic sight to see" (ch. 1). But what Bella chooses to see is entirely different from Jessica, noticing first Effy, then her wheelchair. This is not to say that Bella chooses to "see the person, not the wheelchair" (a well-meaning but often problematic line of thinking). Rather Bella recognizes that the two are not mutually exclusive; Effy's wheelchair and other mobility aids are part of her identity.

Like their disabled Sues, LisbethsGirlfriend and The Plasma have the choice to come out to fans or to potentially be outed later on by flammers. Again, the line between fans and flammers is

a tenuous one, as the authors risk fannish acceptance for targeted backlash. And, as disabled Suethors, they are doubly stigmatized. In their respective disclaimers, both authors do choose to out themselves from the very beginning of their fics as disabled, linking their real identity to their fannishly produced narratives. *LisbethsGirlfriend* even discloses her sexual orientation alongside her disability. These disclaimers alert readers that the authors have a very personal stake in the story and events that follow. By outing themselves online as Mary Sues, both authors also out their intentions as self-inserts.<sup>6</sup> Surprisingly, as self-outed Gimp Sues, *LisbethsGirlfriend* and *The Plasma* entirely escape hostile reviews and flammers. Instead, both authors are met with support and loved, not out of pity, but out of respect. Fans' responsiveness to these Gimp Sues is encouraging, as they follow, review, and develop alongside the fics. Other fans on the spectrum find their way into the review section, finding their own voice in the margins of the story and coming into dialogue with nondisabled and disabled fans. Often these disabled fans have multiple disabilities, offering up different perspectives and lived experiences. Meaningful conversations are started and a network is built through these online spaces, crippling the community.

Gimp Sues open fandom up to disability issues. Their fics provide readily accessible content about disability, expanding the fannish community to include the disability community. As well, their personal and fannish accounts reject normalcy, ablebodieness, and heteronormativity, instead giving us alternative stories about possibility and pleasure. Both authors choose a happy ending for their Sues. In *Forgive Me For Loving You*, Effy and Bella find love, literally beginning a new chapter in life together. By the end of *The Plasma's* fanfic, Bella and Edward have worked through their neurodiverse worlds to find happiness. Choosing a

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<sup>6</sup> Bella Swan has also raised suspicions that she too might be Meyer's own Mary Sue. Fans and critics have called for Meyers to confess, to come out with the truth about Bella's origins.

happy ending is by no means a superficial authorial decision nor a way of pleasing themselves or their fans. Instead, these happy endings seek to revise ableist attitudes, giving us alternative disability narratives not predicated on disability being cured or erased completely. By pairing Bella with Edward, for instance, *The Plasma* educates readers that people on the spectrum can and do have meaningful relationships, with their family, friends, and partners. Disability here is given a future, a good one even.

In the epilogue, Bella closes *Coping with Change* with the desire to make accommodations on both ends, calling for the need to meet one another somewhere halfway. Leaning into Edward, Bella reflects on their relationship, realizing that, "I don't want to be normal but I do want to be happy and I want us to be happy. I'm willing to compromise and try to make this relationship healthy. I think I'm ready for it."

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