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**“He’s Adorable”: Representations of People with Dwarfism in *Family Guy***

**« Il est adorable » : Représentations des personnes qui ont le nanisme dans la série  
*Family Guy***

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**Abstract**

This paper examines how people with dwarfism<sup>1</sup> are represented in the American animated sitcom *Family Guy*. Using autocritical discourse analysis, this paper reflects on my own response, as a person with dwarfism, to scenes featuring characters with dwarfism. Whilst the show has been criticised for its controversial humour, this paper argues that the show actually exposes negative social attitudes that people with dwarfism encounter from other members of the public while refraining from encouraging stereotypes of dwarfism. The paper builds upon Fink’s (2013) suggestion that animated comedies are a source of both humour and social commentary. This paper suggests that *Family Guy* has the potential to challenge social attitudes towards people with dwarfism and the way they are perceived in society through directing the humour towards those who mock them as opposed to those with dwarfism. However, how the scenes are interpreted depends on the audience, which can be related to Hall’s (1993) reception theory.

Cet article examine comment les personnes qui ont le nanisme ont représentées dans la série d’animation américaine *Family Guy*. À l’aide d’une analyse autocritique du discours, je réfléchis dans cet article à ma propre réponse, en tant que personne de petite taille, à des scènes mettant en scène des personnages qui ont le nanisme. Alors que l’émission a été critiquée pour son humour controversé, cet article soutient qu’elle expose en fait les attitudes sociales négatives que les personnes de petite taille rencontrent de la part d’autres membres du public, tout en s’abstenant d’encourager les stéréotypes associés au nanisme. L’article s’appuie sur la suggestion de Fink (2013) selon laquelle les comédies animées sont une source à la fois d’humour et de commentaire social. Il suggère que *Family Guy* a le potentiel de remettre en question les attitudes sociales envers les personnes qui ont le nanisme et la façon dont elles sont perçues dans la société, en dirigeant l’humour vers les personnes qui se moquent d’elles plutôt que vers les personnes de petite taille elles-mêmes. Cependant, l’interprétation des scènes dépend du public, ce qui rejoint la théorie de la réception de Hall (1993).

**Keywords**

Dwarfism; *Family Guy*; Disability Humour; Social Attitudes; Autocritical Discourse Analysis; Reception Theory

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<sup>1</sup> The correct term to use to refer to someone with dwarfism is often contested. Terms include: dwarf, person with restricted growth, person of short stature, person with dwarfism and little person (Little People of America, 2015). The term dwarfism is the most common term used both medically and socially, particularly within the UK, and thus is the term I have chosen to use as well as the term person with dwarfism.

## Introduction

Throughout history, and within the current media, people with dwarfism have been a popular form of entertainment, not so much for any talents but due to their distinctive appearance, in particular, their small stature, which is often associated with humour. As Kruse states, “Among other ‘disabilities’ dwarfism, as a discursive identity, has a unique and ambiguous history with roots in mythology and the commodification of anomalous bodies through enfreakment” (Kruse 2003, 496). As dwarfism is popular within the entertainment industry, it is important to understand how they are represented in different shows and what the implications may be for people with dwarfism in society.

Adult animated comedies have grown in popularity since *The Simpsons* first aired in 1989. Since then, shows such as *South Park* (1997-present), *King of the Hill* (1997-2010), *Family Guy* (1999-present) and *American Dad* (2005-present), to name a few, have begun to dominate television screens alongside regular sitcoms. Evolved from situation comedy, these popular animated shows reflect on contemporary American life and prompt the audience to think about social issues through comedy (Alberti, 2003; Turner, 2004; Gray 2005; Mills, 2005). *Family Guy* is an American animated sitcom. The show first aired in 1999 and is broadcast in numerous countries including the USA, Canada, UK and Australia. In the UK alone, *Family Guy* received over 1 million viewers when it aired on BBC3 (Deans 2010). With reference to reception theory, due to *Family Guy*'s popularity, it has the unintentional possibility of challenging negative stereotypes towards people with dwarfism. However, how the scenes from *Family Guy* are interpreted can differ depending on the identity of audience members (Hall, 1993). This paper argues that the intended purpose of the media can be interpreted differently by the audience depending on their familiarity with experiences of dwarfism.

*Family Guy* revolves around the Griffin family and an inner circle of their neighbours and close friends. Peter Griffin is the patriarch of the family and the show's protagonist. Peter is constructed as a person who has learning difficulties and thus can be considered a disabled character. In episode 6 season 4 ("Petarded") Peter is declared "mentally retarded" after taking part in the MacArthur's Fellow Programme. Of course, "retard" or the "r-word" is an example of disability hate speech. Sherry et al. (2019) point out that "retard" is used as an insult and reinforces stigma toward people with learning difficulties. Peter's learning difficulty is used as a narrative crutch to provoke humour throughout the show. The title of the episode is a portmanteau of "Peter" and "retarded" and works to further reinforce stigmatization of people with learning difficulties. But as this article will demonstrate, problematic terminology associated with different impairments is still used within the media.

Peter has several close friends, including Joe Swanson, a paraplegic police officer. The show also includes another notable disabled minor character, Greased up Deaf Guy, who makes nine recurring appearances over five seasons (season 3-15). McKeown and Darke suggest that the show is 'seemingly obsessed with disability' (McKeown and Darke 2013, 157). Much of the show's comedy appears to revolve around issues of disability. Although there is no regular character with dwarfism there are many scenes that feature them in minor roles, particularly within cutaway gags.

The show is often criticized for its humour as it is often deemed offensive to various minority groups. Most notably is the controversy the show caused in 2010 when it featured a character with Down syndrome. Former US Vice President Sarah Palin, who has a son with Down syndrome, publicly criticised the Episode "Extra Medium Large" due to its portrayal of a character with Down syndrome. Walters argued that Palin failed to get the joke, which was directed at her as opposed to her son (Walters 2013). McKeown and Darke provide an analysis of the episode and posit that the show challenges common disability stereotypes,

such as “dependent” and “pitiful” embodiment. This works to undermine social presumptions about disability, thus challenging the audience to perceive disability differently (McKeown and Darke 2013). The episode, which focuses on the Griffins’ son Chris dating a girl with Down syndrome, refrains from using any derogatory language towards people with learning difficulties and does not encourage the audience to laugh at the character with Down syndrome (McKeown and Darke 2013). Thus, the comedy they use in this situation can be considered disability humour rather than disabling humour. Including disabled characters and using disability humour helps to discourage the audience from laughing *at* disability whilst still *including* disabled people in everyday situations.

This article aims to show how not all humour concerning dwarfism is negative, but can actually promote awareness depending on audience interpretation. Wilde suggests that comedy has the ability to challenge problematic stereotypes of dwarfism. It is argued that using humour in the show exposes negative social attitudes that people with dwarfism encounter from other members of the public, whilst refraining from encouraging perpetuation of stereotypes associated with dwarfism (Wilde 2018). I will demonstrate how *Family Guy* presents characters with dwarfism as ordinary members of society and exposes some of the social encounters they experience. This corresponds to Fink’s suggestion that animated comedies are a source of both humour and social commentary. It is argued that *Family Guy* exposes social attitudes towards people with dwarfism and the way they are perceived in society, by directing the humour towards those who mock them as opposed to those with dwarfism (Fink 2013).

I have dwarfism and have experienced the unwanted consequences of reductive representations of dwarfism in the media. For example, it is not unusual for me to be asked “where my six little friends are” or to be called names relating to characters with dwarfism, such as “Mini-me” and “Oompa Loompa”. This makes me increasingly critical of depictions

of dwarfism in the media. However, when watching *Family Guy* I have noticed a difference in how people with dwarfism are represented in comparison to other shows and can actually relate to the characters and their situation. For example, I have been asked intrusive questions by strangers, something *Family Guy* picks up on and demonstrates. I find the humour quite refreshing as it does not rely on crafting jokes from existing stereotypes of dwarfism.

However, how I interpret the scenes will differ from how other people do. This relates to the reception theory of humour.

This article starts with an overview of the cultural history of representations of people with dwarfism, concluding with a summary of recent influential representations that have come to dominate the Western cultural imaginary. It then moves toward an outline of key theories of humour interpolating disability (especially adult animated sitcoms) and explores their usefulness for analysing representations of people with dwarfism in *Family Guy*. The section then summarises previous analytical frameworks employed to analyse *Family Guy* to acknowledge the previously recognised complexity of this text. I then move to focus on the methodology used to demonstrate the benefits of autocritical discourse analysis, which combines autoethnography and critical discourse analysis to analyse media texts using personal experiences of disability. Drawing from examples given across sections two and three, the fourth section offers an analysis of the embodiment of people with dwarfism in *Family Guy*. The final section then reflects upon the argument presented and suggests future avenues for research.

### **Section I - The Complex Relation Between Humour and Disability**

Humour about disability is complex. Laughing at disabled people can seem cruel, as disabled people are often culturally constructed as “tragic” and “pitiful”. According to Noonan, “jokes about disabled people are often seen as mean spirited and denigrating, they

flaunt a callous insensitivity to human tragedy and suffering” (Noonan 2010, 54). Yet, disability is not immune to humour, and this humour can expose problematic sociocultural messaging about people with impairments. This exposure depends on the type of humour used.

Reid, Hammond-Stoughton and Smith suggest that there are two forms of humour related to disability: disability humour and disabling humour. Disabling humour is criticised for promoting disablism within society as the purpose is to mock disabled people. Hammond-Stoughton and Smith argue that disabling humour reinforces stereotypes and negative representations of disability, including the use of derogatory language (Reid et al. 2006).

Disability humour, on the other hand, challenges cultural assumptions held toward disabled people. Shakespeare points out that in relation to comedy, disabled people are moving away from being laughed at to laughing at their situations and at non-disabled people, which challenges prejudices aimed towards disabled people (Shakespeare 2004). Although often performed by disabled comedians, disability humour can also be used in other forms of entertainment, including animated sitcoms. While disabled comedians mostly perform the latter, it can be argued that the use of disability humour is also apparent in animated comedies. Haller argues that disability humour can be considered a new phase of humour and is found in shows such as *Family Guy* where disabled characters are not pitied or scorned, but are instead incorporated into the show on an equal basis to other characters (Haller 2003). This means of including disabled characters demonstrates to the audience that disabled people are a part of society and that the audience is permitted to laugh at their experiences as opposed to directly at their impairment. Haller also points out that humour can be used as a way to communicate disability issues with audiences (Haller 2010). However, this is dependent on how the joke is interpreted by the audience. It is the response that is important to consider as it can shape how the audience then responds to the person who is the

subject of the humour. Reid-Hresko and Reid argue that whilst disability humour can challenge stereotypes, if the audience fails to recognise the joke, it may promote disabling humour (Reid-Hresko 2005). This can be dependent on the audience's sociocultural background as well as the influence of other representations upon them. For example, stereotypes associated with dwarfism are very prominent in the media and have been for centuries. Thus, media has the potential to be highly influential in people's conceptions of dwarfism. To counteract these stereotypes, other representations may need to be more obvious in their meaning.

There is growing attention in regard to how adult animated sitcoms challenge disability stereotypes and the way disabled people are perceived within society (See, Mallett, 2010; McKeown and Darke, 2013; Fink, 2013; Reid-Hresko and Reid, 2005). Fink argues that *The Simpsons*, a popular American animated sitcom, provides social criticism about disability and engages the audience in questioning political correctness about disability and humour (Fink 2013). *The Simpsons*, in this example, demonstrates how popular typical American primetime shows often ridicule disabled people in a way that is deemed acceptable in society. Thus, this show provides a gateway to understanding how disability is typically represented within the media. How the characters are represented and used within the show determines how they are perceived, and exerts influence over whether or not the humour deployed encourages people to laugh at them (reinforcing negative stereotypes).

Similarly, Reid-Hresko and Reid examine three episodes of *South Park* to demonstrate how the show problematizes stigmatizing representations and disabling attitudes towards disabled people (Reid-Hresko 2003). Whilst some of the stereotypes are predominantly negative, such as *South Park*'s depiction of two characters with mobility and learning difficulties, the humour does not focus on them. The episodes they focus on revolve around how the non-disabled characters interact with the various disabled characters, such as



through acts of pity and not being able to see beyond a person's disability. Notably, whilst the characters may be depicted stereotypically, the actual comedy focuses on how non-disabled people perceive and subsequently treat them. They argue that the episodes encourage audiences to question and rethink how society engages with disabled people. This humour framework resonates with modern reception theory.

Reception theory was devised by Hall and is based on the belief that media representations are encoded by the producer and then decoded by the audience. The crux of the theory is that representations can be decoded with different meanings depending on the audience and their background (Hall 1993). Hall also argues that the audience's interpretation of a text is highly influenced by sociocultural structures and there are three different positions of decoding this: the *dominant hegemonic position*, *negotiated position* and *oppositional view* (Hall 1993). Each demonstrates a degree of understanding of the original message but can be misinterpreted. The *dominant hegemonic position* is when the audience decodes the representation with the same belief as the producer (Hall 1993). The *negotiated position* is based on the belief that the message is decoded based on particular sociocultural beliefs held by the audience, which misinterprets the intention of the text. In this instance, representations of dwarfism in *Family Guy* will be decoded by the audience using long-held beliefs about dwarfism abundant in mass media. Lastly, the *oppositional view* is where the audience is capable of decoding the message in the intended way, but this decoding is based on their own societal beliefs and often sees their unintended message within the text. In this instance, I will use theories within Disability Studies to demonstrate that *Family Guy* has the potential to challenge dominant stereotypes, even if this is not the intention.

## **Section II - Representations of Dwarfism and Their Social Impact**

It is often pointed out that dwarfism is one of the few impairments that has been used as a form of entertainment for others throughout history, including within royal courts, freak shows and circuses (Adelson 2005). Adelson points out that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century European courts, people with dwarfism were often traded and used to amuse others (Adelson 2005). In the circus, people are encouraged to mock performers including people with dwarfism, but pity is always absent (Bogdan 1996). The Victorian Freak is a classic example that demonstrates how people with visible and often rare impairments, including people with dwarfism, were used for entertainment purposes. Shakespeare argues that freak shows are a “cross between a zoo and a museum” (Shakespeare 1994, 287). The purpose of the freak show was to expose those whose body deviated from the norm in a way that their physical traits dominated the entire person on exhibit (Thomson 1997). The height of someone with dwarfism was their only reason for being on display. Despite the demise of the freak show, people who were exhibited in them still arouse public fascination (Grosz 1991). Films and television shows continue to provide examples of alternative ways of exhibiting people with dwarfism. Table 1 shows some common stereotypes associated with dwarfism and some of the films/televisions these depictions have appeared in.

<b>Common stereotypes of dwarfism in the media</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Humorous	<i>Austin Powers</i> (1999, 2002), <i>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</i> (1937), <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> (1939), <i>The Terror of Tiny Town</i> (1938), <i>Life's Too Short</i> (2012)
Mythical / Fantasy	<i>Time Bandits</i> (1981), <i>Willow</i> (1988), <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> (1939)
Oddity	<i>Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory</i>

	(1971), Tod Browning's <i>Freaks</i> (1932).
Evil	<i>Rumpelstiltskin</i> (1812), <i>Twin Peaks</i> (1990-1991)
Childlike	<i>Austin Powers</i> (1999, 2002)

*Table 1- Common stereotypes of dwarfism in the media.*

People with dwarfism are prominent in numerous films where their dwarfism is their main feature, played upon in a humorous or fantastical way. Haberer points out that within various forms of media, people with dwarfism are often “depicted based on the novelty factor of their stature rather than any other personal attributes” (Haberer 2010, 10). In most of these exemplars, the characters with dwarfism are dressed in fancy costumes (as opposed to any ordinary clothes) and are often segregated from the other characters. For example, in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the actors with dwarfism play the role of Oompa Loompas who work for Willy Wonka but are rarely seen with him or the other characters unless called upon. It is apparent that in numerous roles people with dwarfism are rarely depicted as ordinary human beings, instead constructed as mischievous beings that are happy to be ridiculed and laughed *at* rather than *with*.

The 2020 special issue on representations of dwarfism in the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* explores an array of representations of dwarfism, demonstrating that rarely do the representations of dwarfism reflect the lived experiences of people with dwarfism. It can be argued that most representations of dwarfism encourage them to be laughed at. This is a form of disabling humour. Disabling humour according to Barnes helps perpetuate the pre-conceived attitudes towards, assumptions about, and expectations of disabled people in the minds of non-disabled people - thus reinforcing the foundations on which discrimination rests (Barnes 1991). Dwarfism is considered an uncommon disability (1 in 10,000 births) and thus encounters with people with dwarfism in society can be considered

rare. What is not uncommon is their appearance in mass media that is often exploitative of their height. Therefore, how they are perceived within the media can influence how other members of society interact with them. Thus, providing a representation, even if humorous, can provide a social commentary of dwarfism that enables the audience to better understand their lived experiences.

How dwarfism is portrayed in the media can influence people's perceptions of people with dwarfism and subsequently how they interact with them. Pritchard suggests that it is not uncommon for people with dwarfism to experience name calling that relates to popular characters with dwarfism in films, such as "Mini-me", which are always humorous. This demonstrates the power that popular renderings of dwarfism have on wider society (Pritchard 2021). Television programmes and films bring in a large audience and thus any negative representation of dwarfism is likely to perpetuate existing stereotypes within society, resonating with the negotiated position.

Adelson argues that people with dwarfism are trying to adopt a more positive identity and move away from representations of dwarfism as a form of entertainment subject to ridicule (Adelson 2005). Another avenue is to increase positive representations of dwarfism in various forms of media, including animation, that have the potential to challenge stereotypes. Pritchard points out that other members of the public who ridicule people with dwarfism in society do not use those characters with dwarfism in television shows and films that do not encourage the audiences to laugh at them and challenge stereotypes associated with dwarfism (Pritchard 2021). What I find interesting is that despite *Family Guy's* popularity, I have never experienced any of the jokes involving characters with dwarfism being aimed at me, but this is only my interpretation. Due to dwarfism's strong connection to humour, and the effect it can have on people with dwarfism in society, it is important to explore how humour concerning dwarfism plays out in animated shows.

### **Section III – Methodology**

To understand how dwarfism is represented within *Family Guy*, I analysed several episodes which all featured people with dwarfism in them. I used an Autocritical discourse analysis created by David Bolt (2021) to analyse several representations which were influenced by my positionality. Autocritical discourse analysis is a combination of autoethnography and critical discourse analysis. Bolt suggests that autocritical discourse analysis values personal narratives which can help to challenge dominant cultural representations and their impact (Bolt 2021). It recognises that how I interpret the media texts will be influenced by my own experiences of dwarfism. In this paper, I use autoethnography to reflect on my own positionality and social experiences as a person with dwarfism and deconstruct how they influence my interpretation of the scenes featuring dwarfs. Mendez has another useful framing, stating that “autoethnography is a method that allows researchers to draw on their own experiences to understand a particular phenomenon or culture” (Mendez, 2013, p. 280). Whether I laugh or take offense to these scenes is influenced by my living experiences as a woman with dwarfism.

While I am interpreting these scenes based on my own experiences as someone with dwarfism, I am also assuming that other people may interpret them differently based on their experiences or exposure to dwarfism, both of which are likely to be shaped by dominant cultural representations. I can argue that representations of dwarfism in *Family Guy* offer important social commentary, however dominant cultural representations of dwarfism are still likely to influence societal beliefs about dwarfism - which presents potential to impact interpretations of particular scenes.

### **Section IV- Representations of Dwarfism in *Family Guy***

An important part of representation is the use of language used towards people with dwarfism. Haller, Dorries and Rahn work to point out ways in which language can reinforce dominant views towards disabled people (Haller et al. 2006). When referring to people with dwarfism, terms often switch between “midget” and “dwarf”. Whilst dwarf is deemed an acceptable term by a majority of people with dwarfism, midget is deemed unacceptable. According to Little People of America (LPA), over 90% of their members deem the word inappropriate (LPA 2015). Pritchard argues that midget should be considered a form of hate speech as it is often used to demean people with dwarfism in society. They also point out that the word midget is derived from the word “midge” meaning sandfly, which is dehumanising (Pritchard 2019). The term was popularised within freak shows, a place where people with dwarfism were exploited for the amusement of others. Despite the demise of freak shows, the term lives on in mass media, including within *Family Guy*.

Episode 10, season 5 (“Peter’s Two Dads”) contains a cutaway gag entitled “Dwarf amongst midgets” that leads to a supermarket scene where we see three supposed midgets asking a person with dwarfism, whose body size and shape differ slightly, to reach an item off a shelf. The name of the cutaway gag demonstrates that the creators of *Family Guy* associate the term “midget” with people with proportionate dwarfism. This is a common error, as people with proportionate dwarfism were popular freak show exhibits. In the freak shows, they were often referred to as “midgets” to distinguish them from people with proportionate dwarfism (Bogdan 1988).

In the cutaway gag, despite the shelf being low and in easy reach for the character with dwarfism, it is out of reach for the others. Of course, the humour is directed at the fact that people with dwarfism cannot usually complete this task and rely on average-sized people to reach items off shelves for them. It could reinforce needing assistance as humorous, but for me, the humour comes from the incongruous situation. I could relate because I suppose I

would feel good if I was not the one asking for assistance, but instead in a position to give it. After all, dependency is often stigmatised within society. The scene demonstrates a usually disabling task for people with dwarfism and uses it to imply that the person with dwarfism feels good for being able to complete a task that he would usually need help with from someone of average stature. When they ask for help, the dwarf replies “yes, I can” affirmatively and confidently. The scene creates a hierarchy and places the dwarf character in the position usually held by an average-sized person. The scene subtly exposes the way non-disabled people usually feel good when assisting disabled people. Although the scene uses derogatory language, the characters are portrayed ordinarily and do not display any of the usual stereotypes associated with dwarfism, such as being humorous or mythical. Representations of people with dwarfism that differ from stereotypical representations of them have the potential to change people’s perceptions of them. However, the terminology also needs to be appropriate.

In *Family Guy*, there is no main character or recurring character with dwarfism. All of the characters with dwarfism, to date, feature in the show’s cutaway gags. The purpose of the cutaway gags is to add humour to the main plotline (McKeown and Darke 2013). While they are there to add humour, it is how the humour is directed and used that is important for us to consider. Reid, Hammond-Stoughton and Smith argue disability humour encourages the reconceptualization of disability. It is used to promote an understanding of the lived experiences of disabled people (Reid et al. 2006). In several scenes, people with dwarfism in *Family Guy* are shown to be ordinary people with ordinary lives. This challenges usual representations of people with dwarfism, which Haberer suggests equates dwarfism as either abnormal or fantasy like embodiment (Haberer 2010).

It is apparent from this scene that people with dwarfism are thought to be people slightly taller than “midgets” and with different body proportions. There are over 200

different types of dwarfism, with Achondroplasia being the most common and features a disproportionate body size. Other forms of dwarfism can result in a proportionate body size. Little People of America note that there is confusion between the word “midget” and “dwarf”, with many people in society believing that the term “midget” is an acceptable term to use towards people with proportionate dwarfism (LPA 2015). The confusion of believing that there exist both people with dwarfism and “midgets”, as opposed to recognising the word “midget” as an offensive term, even towards those with proportionate dwarfism, indicates a widespread lack of awareness. The term “midget” is still used within society and within the media despite protests from various organisations for people with dwarfism, such as Little People of America (LPA) and the Restricted Growth Association (RGA) in the UK. Although these organisations are well known amongst people with dwarfism, they do not have the same awareness-raising platform as *Family Guy*. Thus, *Family Guy* has the potential to popularise derogatory terms associated with dwarfism. Therefore, the use of the word “midget” in the show can be considered part of disabling humour, which perpetuates negative stereotypes of people with dwarfism in society.

In numerous scenes, *Family Guy* exposes how other members of the public respond to people with dwarfism in an infantilising or humorous manner. In episode 9 season 4 (“Breaking Out is Hard to Do”), Joe Swanson is called to a domestic dispute. Peter and Quagmire (another close friend and neighbour of Peter’s) accompany Joe to the scene where we see a couple, who both have dwarfism, arguing. Despite the fight presenting as a situation that would not normally be found humorous, Peter and Quagmire respond with laughter. Immediately the scene exposes a common social encounter experienced by people with dwarfism, implicitly demonstrating that people with dwarfism are considered figures of fun by wider society. This response questions how people perceive people with dwarfism in any given situation. Quagmire then begins to record the incident on his phone whilst continuing



to laugh. Ellis points out that being photographed or recorded on a camera phone by strangers is not an uncommon experience for people with dwarfism (Ellis 2018). A person watching Quagmire recording the characters on his phone may find that funny in a different way to someone like me. I can relate to the scene, whereas another viewer may be encouraged to behave in the same way as Quagmire.

Joe begins chasing the couple around their living room before they all appear from behind the sofa in a *Punch and Judy* style show. During this part, the comedy is created by all three disabled characters: Joe (the paraplegic police officer) and the married couple with dwarfism. In this scene, the use of people with dwarfism as comedic props that resemble puppets may promote disabling humour, depending on how the audience interprets the scene. Walters asserts that getting the joke about disability is often not as simple as it seems. Depending on how it is done it can either be damaging or used to challenge negative perceptions of disability (Walters 2013). Mallett argues that there is a tendency to assume that any negativity in relation to disability humour reinforces negative attitudes within society (Mallett 2010). While it is true that a lot of humour concerning dwarfism can perpetuate negative stereotypes and subsequently affect how people with dwarfism are perceived in society, it does not mean that all humour concerning dwarfism is negative.

During the whole scene, Peter and Quagmire watch the couple fighting whilst Joe tries to intervene. Peter and Quagmire observe the situation in a humorous manner. In the end, when Joe picks them both up, Quagmire responds, "Ahh, they got tuckered out". This end scene - in particular Quagmire's quip - can be considered infantilizing due to his patronizing attitude towards them that is usually reserved for children. Grosz claims that people with dwarfism occupy a binary middle ground between children and adults (Grosz 1991). Despite the couple's positionality as adults in an adult relationship, Quagmire fails to see this and instead cannot see past their height and its similarity to a child's. Ablon suggests

that due to their height it is common for other members of the public to perceive people with dwarfism as children and treat them accordingly (Ablon 1984). The characters with dwarfism do not act like children: instead, the show demonstrates how other members of the public often perceive and subsequently treat them as such. In fact, the show works to challenge a common myth that disabled people are asexual (Shakespeare 2000). Furthermore, the couple seems to live in a nice house, which would suggest a middle class lifestyle, but most of all an ordinary home amongst other people. Wilde suggests that people with dwarfism are often depicted as living as a separate race (e.g. *The Wizard of Oz*) away from the rest of society (Wilde 2018). Yet, in *Family Guy*, they live in suburbia. In this case, the show exposes society's attitude towards dwarfism, as opposed to totally infantilising the characters with dwarfism in the same way previous media is prone to do, e.g. *Austin Powers*.

In episode 10, season 7 ("FOX-y Lady"), a man with dwarfism, wearing a suit and tie (implicitly indicating a professional and respectable look) announces the bombing of Pearl Harbour. He announces the bombing from behind a standing lectern while standing on a chair. This situation highlights how the built environment is not size-suitable for people with dwarfism. This is a common theme within the show as it regularly demonstrates how Joe is unable to access different places due to a lack of accessible spaces. The scene shows a person with dwarfism working as a government representative, which works to juxtapose this bit character against the stereotypical professions associated with people with dwarfism, such as circus performers. Adelson points out that people with dwarfism are now employed in various occupations (Adelson 2005). Despite his professionalism, the creators show how other members of society cannot see past a person's dwarfism. As he begins to talk we hear a member of the audience, who we do not see, interrupt and shout, "He's adorable". Whilst the voice of the man with dwarfism indicates an intelligent persona, the man in the audience speaks in a comedic tone. The man in the audience commenting on the appearance of the

person with dwarfism signifies how others infantilize them. This indicates that the joke is not aimed towards the person with dwarfism, but rather at society's inability to see past a person's dwarfism and some of the stereotypes associated with them. The scene contains what Bolt terms *disablist infantilisation*, which is how other people sometimes treat disabled people like children (Bolt 2014). The scene does not portray the person with dwarfism in any negative way and thus does not play on any cultural stereotypes often associated with dwarfism. Rather, the scene emphasises how other members of the public often perceive people with dwarfism and the attitudes the person with dwarfism endures as a result of the encounter. What is also apparent is the tone of voice from the audience member, which is rather childlike. The character with dwarfism is not constructed as childlike; instead, the member of the audience, who we can perceive to be of average stature, is. Lockyer suggests that taking the focus from a person's impairment and instead focusing the comedy on the disabling stereotypes held by other people and the problematic encounters disabled people experience can aid in producing comedy that does not reinforce negative stereotypes (Lockyer 2015).

In another cutaway gag, "The old man and the midget" (episode 8, season 5, "Barely Legal"), we see two people sitting at a bus stop. One is an older man and the other is a person with dwarfism, although inappropriately referred to in the episode as a "midget". The person with dwarfism is seen wearing regular clothing and is carrying out an everyday activity. There is no indication that the person with dwarfism is anything other than an ordinary member of society. The older man is seen staring at the person with dwarfism who after a brief silence asks, "Sir, will you please stop staring at me" to which the older man replies, "Where's the rest of you?" in a rather angry tone. Thomson suggests that due to their "novel appearance and rarity as to the sight of someone with dwarfism, it can call up predetermined reactions" (Thomson 2009). The creators of *Family Guy* demonstrate a common encounter

for people with dwarfism. According to Lockyer, disability humour can aid in demonstrating to non-disabled people the issues disabled people experience daily (Lockyer 2015). While it's true that a joke is made towards the height of the person with dwarfism, the scene simultaneously exposes social ignorance towards dwarfism and highlights some of the social issues they encounter, including being stared at and being asked intrusive questions (Pritchard 2021). Furthermore, a study conducted by Shakespeare et al. found that 96% of their respondents, all of which had dwarfism, had reported being stared at by other members of the public (Shakespeare et al. 2010). The scene emphasises social ignorance towards dwarfism yet does not portray the character with dwarfism in any stereotypical way. This according to Lockyer is a form of disability humour that helps to switch the direction of the humour from the disabled person to the disabling attitudes prominent within society (Lockyer 2015). However, Haller points out that humour has both a stimulus (joke) and a response to it (laughter) (Haller 2003). While the intended purpose of the joke may be to demonstrate the unwanted interactions people with dwarfism encounter, the audience response to the scenario may differ. For example, I can only presume that the intended purpose of the scene is to highlight how people with dwarfism are stared at and asked intrusive questions. However, someone else may think what the old man says is funny and think it is acceptable to repeat the joke to a person with dwarfism in the street. This of course is dependent on how the joke is interpreted based on the audience's societal beliefs. As a woman with dwarfism, I can relate to the scene based on my own past experiences and laugh at the old man's ignorance. Conversely, someone else whose knowledge of dwarfism is based on problematic representations of dwarfism may laugh at the old man's comment assuming that a person with dwarfism is not fully human.

## **Section V - Are They Laughing With Us Or At Us?**

Unlike stereotypical depictions of people with dwarfism, in *Family Guy* people with dwarfism appear in ordinary, everyday roles. However, how these depictions are interpreted is largely dependent on the audience's cultural beliefs. Although the show is often criticised for its controversial humour it can be argued that the show uses that humour to expose disabling attitudes towards dwarfism. As Lockyer points out, disability humour is used to draw attention to how disability stereotypes demean disabled people (Lockyer 2015). Whilst the scenes involving people with dwarfism are humorous, the humour is often associated with other people's reactions toward them as opposed to their appearance or their own actions. McKeown and Darke argue that the creators of *Family Guy* demonstrate an awareness of issues surrounding disability and offer a dissection of contemporary social perceptions of disability (McKeown and Darke 2013). The scenes often revolve around disabling social encounters that people with dwarfism experience and thus exposes their audiences to these experiences, such as being stared at or being found amusing by other members of the public. The writers of the show also demonstrate an awareness of *disablist infantilisation* concerning dwarfism and expose this in some of their scenes. Despite this, Reid, Hammond-Stoughton and Smith argue that disability humour not only depends on the joke but also on the audience's responses (Reid et al. 2006). We cannot be sure how all audiences respond to the scenes in *Family Guy* featuring people with dwarfism. What can be argued though is that the representations differ from the usual stereotypes of people with dwarfism. *Family Guy* shows people with dwarfism in an ordinary manner, such as working and having a family. This is a far cry from the usual stereotypes culturally associated with dwarfism. If these scenes are interpreted differently from usual representations of dwarfism, which they are likely to be given that they do not adhere to the usual stereotypes, then they may influence how other people perceive people with dwarfism.

Wilde argues that stereotypical representations of dwarfism reinforce them as having limited personality traits and social expectations (Wilde 2018). However, *Family Guy* has shown characters with dwarfism with a range of personalities and social expectations, including the ability to be employed in esteemed government roles. The show has also challenged the dominant “gang” stereotype associated with dwarfism (Wilde 2018), as numerous characters with dwarfism are featured by themselves. Haller and Ralph suggest that disability humour that challenges ableist assumptions and disability stereotypes helps to challenge attitudes towards disability (Haller and Ralph 2003). In all scenes included in this analysis, the characters with dwarfism were portrayed in an ordinary manner, dressed in everyday clothes, often partaking in everyday activities (e.g. shopping) and thus were part of society. They were not portrayed in any tokenized manner akin to dwarfism, such as being humorous or mythical. The characters with dwarfism were not perceived as childlike or humorous, but rather other characters perceived them as such to make an implicit joke indicating that society’s perception of and interactions *with* people with dwarfism was the crux of the joke.

Mallett highlights the belief that only disabled people should only carry out disability humour (Mallett 2010). While there is a movement regarding actors with dwarfism turning down roles that perpetuate negative stereotypes of dwarfism, there are still people with dwarfism who partake in these roles, including for lowbrow entertainment. Thus, humour that features people with dwarfism and that is created by non-disabled people should be welcomed providing the humour is disability humour.

To further challenge stereotypes, the writers of the show should refrain from using derogatory language when referring to people with dwarfism, as they already do towards other minority groups. The use of disablist language is common within comedy shows (Martin 2010). Though they may not mean intentional harm, using the word “midget” can be

considered disabling humour. To fully achieve equal status with all the other characters the use of the word “midget” must cease in future episodes. The use of the word “midget” shows how negative representations influence modern representations of people with dwarfism.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has shown how humour can be used as a form of social commentary to highlight the unwanted, often unintentionally derisive attention people with dwarfism experience.

Humour about disability, including toward people with dwarfism, is not necessarily negative but can have unwanted social implications, which are dependent on how audiences interpret the joke. Humour has the potential to expose common social attitudes experienced by people with dwarfism in society. This can help to educate people about dwarfism, especially when considering that living experience encounters are rare. Scenes that indicate social ignorance towards dwarfism, such as scenes where other characters stare or make comments which reinforce social perceptions of dwarfism, can help to challenge attitudes towards dwarfism.

*Family Guy* can challenge disabling stereotypes and attitudes by changing the directionality of humour, however, this is still dependent on how the audience interprets the extent to which the joke lands at the person with dwarfism's expense. Using reception theory, this article has argued that even jokes which supposedly use disability humour and challenge problematic stereotypes can still be misinterpreted depending on the audience's sociocultural background. For example, as an academic with dwarfism, how I interpret the scenes will differ to a non-disabled person and even to another academic. Thus, further research which explores how different audiences interpret different scenes is worth future academy consideration.

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