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# PORTRAYALS OF THE DISABLED IN BOOKS AND BASALS

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...There stood Peter and Edmund and all the rest of Aslan's army fighting desperately against the crowd of horrible creatures whom she had seen last night; ...in the daylight, they looked even stranger and more evil and deformed...

(p. 173)

Thus, author C. S. Lewis, in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (1970), depicts the evil characters by ascribing to them physical disabilities. In doing so, Lewis perpetuates the negative portrayals of the disabled that exist in much of children's and adolescent and even adult literature--both classical and contemporary.

This article will aversions toward the disabled that still prevail and reasons why they exist. Surveyed literature will show where negative stereotypes of disabled appear, and literature in which characters are realistically portrayed. We will examine the efforts of basal publishers to adequately represent the disabled. The conclusion will present criteria for selecting reading materials in which non-stereotyped characters are depicted. Names of books about characters with impairments are not included because comprehensive annotated bibliographies like Notes from a Different Drummer (Baskin & Harris, 1977) and The Bookfinder (Dreyer, 1977, 1981) are available.

## Aversions Toward the Disabled

Authors and readers alike--unless they have been exposed to disabling conditions--tend to use the terms "disability" and "handicap" as synonyms. However, "disability" refers to a medical condition whereas "handicap" implies a barrier. "Handicap" is thought to have been derived from the time when people who were disabled had no choice but to beg in the streets, cap in hand. And, in doing so, they were avoided by the nondisabled (Interracial Books for Children Bulletin, 1977).

Avoidance of the disabled still exists. Studies (Roessler and Bolton, 1978, p. 12) indicate the reasons:

...1) non-disabled persons are fearful of disablement, dis-

figurement, loss of sensory capacity, loss of self-control, etc.; 2) therefore, contact with afflicted persons causes intense discomfort and arouses anxiety; and 3) hence, disabled persons are avoided and efforts are made to segregate them and isolate them.

Or, as Cohen (1977) writes, the nondisabled fear "handicap germs." Such aversions signify "handicappism."

Another reason the disabled are frequently targets of "handicappism," just as many of us experience the negative results of "ageism" and "sexism," is that as readers—whether as children, adolescents, or adults—we read books in which the disabled often are depicted in certain categories (Moore, 1983):

As evil, sinister, and perpetrators of insidious acts; as the brunts of cruel actions by the unthinking; and/or as passive, always cheerful, and dependent.

According to Cohen (1977, p. 151), such "...presentations [of characters] ...foster negative beliefs, feelings, and/or behavioral tendencies toward the disabled." In addition, many such character portrayals suggest "...wicked things to be shunned or banished" (Reynales, 1976, p. 16). Shurtleff and Monson (1978), confirming the effects of negative characterizations, found that younger children associated the prosthesis used by Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* (Barrie, 1950) with the sinister character of Hook. And we readers accept, consciously or unconsciously, the exclusionary attitudes conveyed in this literature.

### Stereotypical Characters

Some literature reveals the stereotypical portrayals of characters with disabilities. Shakespeare conveys King Richard's evilness through his deformed figure. The Grimm brothers collected folk tales that contain grim-visaged, deformed witches with poor eyesight who commit insidious acts upon innocent children. Charles Dickens' *Tiny Tim*—unwaveringly kind, considerate and passive—declares his wish that the churchgoers see him because he is crippled. Born one-eyed, humpbacked, and lame, Quasimodo, in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is an object who is rejected by society because of his hideousness. In the book, *Heidi* (Spyri, 1980, p. 73), Klara, Heidi's best friend, is referred to as an "...invalid who never goes out [but who is] seldom impatient..." Stevenson, in *Treasure Island*, depicts the one-legged Long John Silver and the blind beggars as symbols of evil and, subliminally perhaps, suggests that the disabled should be avoided and not trusted.

Tales of the past reflect "...an association between beauty and value..." (Cohen, 1977, p. 151). The stories also imply that the disabled "...are different...apart [from society]...and that disablaments are "...punishments we bring upon ourselves by our sinful behavior" (p. 152).

Handicappist stereotypes appear in some contemporary literature in which are found disabled characters. Neufield, in his book *Twink* (1970), dehumanizes Twink and her friend who have cere-

bral palsy. They are described as "...twisted...scarecrow figures ...[who make] chortles...almost happy sounds" (p. 5). Neufield's picture of Twink—blind, severely disabled, but extremely intelligent—is unrealistic and maudlin. In The Pirate Who Tried To Capture the Moon (Haseley, 1983), the sinister nature of the pirate is depicted through his eyepatch, thereby associating blindness and evilness, a recurrent theme in literature.

#### Realistic Portrayals

Although the majority of the examples of disabled characters in contemporary literature "...are bad" (Cohen, 1977, p. 151), some fiction contains positive descriptions of characters with disabilities. The authors of the latter make no attempts to hide the characters' weaknesses, but, concurrently, their strengths are revealed as they successfully cope. These characters do not symbolize evil; they are active and independent, and, as in real life, not always cheerful. Nor are they always completely accepted by the non-disabled—as in real life.

In Winning (Brancato, 1977), Gary Madden, paralyzed in a football accident, experiences many negative emotions about his future. His friends, when they visit him and uncertain of what to do, joke with one another and ignore Gary. Such experiences illustrate the indications of the Roessler and Bolton study (1978) mentioned above. Fourteen-year-old Margaret, in A Dance to Still Music (Corcoran, 1974), encounters the isolation often imposed by deafness. Angered by the insensitivity of school friends and her mother, Margaret retorts that others are blind, physically disabled, but, eventually, are accepted, thereby indicating her fight for acceptance. Ron Jones, author of The Acorn People (1976), in an account of his experiences as a counselor at a camp for the disabled, admits thinking that his close association with these disabled campers could poison him—a further validation of the Roessler and Bolton study. He vacillates as he considers quitting his job but finally determines to remain; happy that he stays, he recounts his final day with "The Acorn People" whom he describes as "...mountain climbers" (p. 78).

#### Basal Publishers

Publishers of basal readers, used in about 95 per cent of the schools in this country, have done little to represent the disabled in basal literature. A recent study (Hopkins, 1982, p. 31) indicates that of 4,656 selections appearing in the most recent editions of 12 major basals, "...only 39 stories dealt with any types of handicapping conditions." Because of the dearth of stories about characters with disabilities, it is "...possible that a child might be exposed to only one story about a handicapped person in six years of school" (p. 31). Blindness was the most commonly represented disability in the 39 stories. Yet, according to the Digest of Education Statistics: 1977-78, the blind comprise less than 0.05 per cent of the total school population.

Among the findings of Hopkins' study was the revelation that certain publishers "...will depict more handicapped characters making positive contributions to society." One such publisher,

simply to meet California requirements, has altered the illustrations in its current series: A hearing aid is depicted on a boy, a leg brace on a girl. Other changes include a girl with metal support crutches, a rocking chair changed to a wheelchair, a boy with a leg brace making a list at a table.

The impact on the portrayal of the disabled through such cosmetic changes as the aforementioned and the inclusion of only 39 stories about the disabled is questionable. The real impact on the attitudes of the non-disabled toward the disabled can occur only when readers are exposed to literature—in books and basals—in which the areas of life that are difficult are understood, and in which characters with disabilities "...represent individuals who cope with real feelings and frustrations" (Huck, 1979, p.421).

#### Criteria for Selecting Literature

Readers should be exposed to literature in books and basals in which there appear disabled characters. But these readers must possess the ability to distinguish between literature in which the disabled symbolize stereotypes and the literature in which characters with disabilities are portrayed realistically (Baskin and Harris, 1977). Exposure to accurate portrayals may best be achieved through the use of certain criteria for selecting appropriate literature.

The following criteria are taken from guidelines formulated by the National Center on Educational Media and Materials for the Handicapped (1977, n.p.):

1. Characters with disabilities should be depicted as participants in diverse but integrated activities rather than in isolated activities that evolve from the disabilities. In real life, persons with disabilities are rapidly mainstreaming themselves. Readers should seek literature in which the disabled are presented in mainstreamed situations.
2. Characters with disabilities should not be described in terms that could be construed as discriminatory. Words such as "lame," "mute," "pathetic" (when it refers to a disabled character), and figurative expressions such as "blind as a bat," "deaf as a doornail," and "crazy as a loon" would be considered discriminatory. And the character portrayals probably would be inaccurate.
3. The literature should depict non-disabled and disabled characters in mutually beneficial interaction. Characters with disabilities should not always be illustrated as the recipients of charitable acts by the non-disabled.
4. The literature should provide role models for the disabled who read the material. It should also enable both the disabled and the non-disabled to read about characters who cope with disabilities realistically.
5. The literature should not emphasize any difference between those with disabilities and those without. Such differences could be noted only if necessary.

Other criteria that will provide readers with the ability to differentiate between literature in which the characters are stereotyped and that in which they are not include the following (Moore, 1979, n.p.):

1. The specialized terminology in the literature must be accurate. Materials in which only vague words describe disabling conditions may indicate that the authors lack the credentials essential for conveying accurate messages.
2. The literature must not imply maudlinism, pity, nor other negative sentiments.

### Conclusion

The potential for affecting change in avoidance of the disabled by the non-disabled lies in books and basals dealing with disablement. Ranging from picture books to adult fiction, literature can be utilized in altering attitudes. Such literature, however, must not contain stereotypical characters who convey negative images that only foster handicappism. Literature must accurately portray the disabled.

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