Disabled youth and teens, like those from other marginalized identities, need authentic and honest representations of themselves in books, but disability has long been excluded from many calls for more diverse books. This critical analysis examines 10 middle grade and young adult books for stereotypical portrayals of disabled people and how the authors cultivate or subvert those tropes. It also discusses how disability is viewed in society, the language of disability, and the necessity of critically engaging with literature.
‘BUT NOW I YEARN FOR A … STORY ABOUT A CRIPPLE WHO ISN’T CURED’: REPRESENTATIONS OF DISABILITY IN MIDDLE GRADE AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by
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Positionality Statement

Several people have asked me why I decided to research representations of disabled people in middle grade and young adult literature. After all, my background in journalism would suggest other topics, like the proliferation of fake news or how to increase media literacy in middle school students. But how disabled people are represented is a topic close to my heart. Eagle-eyed readers may have noticed the use of first-person pronouns when I mentioned disabled people. That was intentional: I am a multiply disabled person. It was, however, also something I struggled with revealing. Most days, I do not look disabled—or rather, most days, I do not look the way nondisabled people think disabled people look; as I am disabled, I always look like a disabled person. Still, I have not always thought of myself as disabled; I have consumed the same ableist messages about the value of disabled people as everyone else. No one had to tell me being disabled is bad; that message is everywhere: in news coverage, in advertising campaigns, in movies, and, of course, in books. I wanted to look at representations of disabled people in the books young people are reading to see what messages they are getting about us and themselves, what mirrors disabled teens get to see themselves in, and what windows nondisabled teens have to see through. I want to look at what, if any, messages exist to contradict the ableist ones we are all getting from all sides. I want to push the conversation forward so that, in another 40 years, we are not sitting in the same place we are now.
Introduction

Adolescence is a difficult and often tumultuous period. Teens seek to determine their identity, what they believe, and where they belong—in short, they are trying to figure out who they are and what their place in the world is. Cultural and identity formation are crucial for this stage in a teen's development, and myriad factors have an impact, including friends, family, school, faith, the larger community, and the media. The effect of media on teens' identity formation means that it is critical that librarians who serve youth collect literature that features and celebrates diversity. As Bishop (1990a) noted, books can serve several important roles, among them windows, through which to see other worlds and experiences; sliding-glass doors to step through and walk around in other worlds and experiences; and mirrors to see themselves and their own experiences reflected back. However, despite the work of many scholars, educators, and activists urging publishing to diversify and to publish #OwnVoices authors, most of the books published and many of those in classrooms and school libraries reflect a white, cisgender, nondisabled, heterosexual experience (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014; Thomas, 2016; Cooperative Children’s Book Center, n.d.).

This does a grave disservice to all children, as children and teens who see themselves constantly reflected in the media they consume can develop what Bishop (1990a) calls a “dangerous ethnocentrism” and an inflated sense of their own value and place in the world (p. x); in other words, they see the privilege they carry as a result of their skin color, religion, ability, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexuality as rightfully
theirs—and, indeed, not as a privilege at all. Thus, when books only act as mirrors for the dominant classes, it can result in devaluing people who are outside of that experience—and in a lack of empathy.

Indeed, the harm is especially insidious for marginalized children and teens, who must contend with fewer books with characters who look and act like them; often, when there are marginalized characters included—for example, queer teens or Black children—they are relegated to a sidekick role or written by outsiders who lack an authentic understanding of what it means to inhabit their particular identity. Bishop (1990a) explains:

When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part (p. ix). These teens are expected to be content with windows only, to never see themselves reflected in the media they consume, while teens who do not experience marginalization can see themselves reflected nearly everywhere. Put another way, some youth and teens are expected to empathize with people who are not like them, while others are not. Thus, it is imperative for librarians to find and collect media that reflect the lived experiences of marginalized youth.

Moreover, there is a clear need to do so across a variety of marginalizations, including those identities that have received less scholarly attention. In her book *Disabling Characters: Representations of Disability in Young Adult Literature*, Patricia Dunn (2015) argues that applying a critical lens to disability representation in young adult literature is crucial:

[T]he status quo is not acceptable. All sorts of barriers prevent people from living
their lives to the fullest, including how forces in society make them feel about themselves. Many of these forces are hidden from the very people (including myself) who participate, perhaps obliviously, in maintaining these forces: harmful assumptions about race, class, gender, age, income level, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and disability. While assumptions about all these groups should be named and challenged, the last one listed—disability—is perhaps the one least likely to be examined from a critical perspective, at least regarding YA literature. Many barriers contributing to disability are material or attitudinal; either way, they are built. They are constructed. And whatever is constructed can be named, mitigated, or removed (p. 1).

Too often, narratives about disability—the few that exist—include harmful tropes and stereotypes, ableist assumptions, and inspiration porn\(^1\). Though Linton (1998) is referring to disability in an academic context when she notes that even a superficial inspection of the literature “reveals only patronizing and distorted representations of disability, and these are left largely unexamined and unchallenged” (p. 4), she could also have been referring to disability representation in media more generally or in works of fiction aimed at teens and tweens. Disabled characters, when they appear, are often used as a way to spur the protagonist to action or to allow the nondisabled characters to enjoy some kind of character growth. Ableist language has seeped into the vernacular to the point that few even notice: calling boring events or people “lame” or calling short people “vertically challenged” (casually lifted from the loaded phrase “physically challenged,” which is problematic in its own right) or using “crippled” as a metaphor—as in, “the politician's campaign was crippled by his propensity for outrageous lies”—or the ubiquity of calling offensive, ridiculous, or unbelievable things “crazy,” for instance. All of this and more can lead to disabled students and nondisabled students alike getting a distorted and harmful view of what various experiences of disability are actually like.

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\(^1\)Grue (2016) defines inspiration porn as “the representation of disability as a desirable but undesired characteristic, usually by showing impairment as a visually or symbolically distinct biophysical deficit in one person, a deficit that can and must be overcome through the display of physical prowess.”
Moreover, Hazlett, Sweeney, and Reins (2011) note that it is especially important for youth with multiple marginalizations—in their population, LGBTQ+ students with disabilities—to find a place to belong:

Still, these memberships refer to majority students’ experiences, i.e., heterosexual and nondisabled. If they feel pain and remorse throughout their adult lives from negative school social experiences, what of those students who never had a place at any lunchroom table? Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) adolescents with intellectual and/or physical disabilities are a significant part of our schools, yet many remain unwelcome, ignored, or pitied by peers and educators, with their issues addressed partially, via controversy, or assumed nonexistent (p. 207).

This matters because, more often than not, disability intersects with other axes of marginalization, making the exclusion of disability in middle grade and young adult literature that much more harmful (Krefting, 2008, p. 110).

**What is disability?**

The field of disability studies recognizes two major models of disability, though there are several others: the medical model and the social model. The medical model of disability is a deficit model that holds that the disability is a lack of something within the individual, e.g., a blind person lacks sight. This model is the one most commonly used by the medical and academic establishments, and it is the definition with which many nondisabled people are most comfortable; Linton (1998) notes that many medical and legal definitions “include incapacity, a disadvantage, deficiency, especially a physical or mental impairment that restricts normal achievement; something that hinders or incapacitates, something that incapacitates or disqualifies” (p. 11). Though tying the framing of disability to medical definitions has had some benefits—including the positive effects medical treatments have had on the quality of life of many disabled people—there have also been tremendously negative consequences, including positioning disability as a
deficit and a personal tragedy; the framing of people “suffering from” or “afflicted with” a disability or medical condition underscores this. It also makes it an individual's responsibility to treat the underlying issue rather than a societal responsibility to address the underlying issues that narrow and restrict the scope of disabled people's lives (Linton, 1998, p. 11). The social (or social-constructionist, as it is sometimes called) model of disability, on the other hand, holds that disability is a construct and makes a distinction between a disability and an impairment. As Hall (2015) explains, “Put in stark terms, a social model view suggests that wheelchair users might have a mobility impairment, but they are disabled by the lack of provision of ramps and appropriate access facilities” (p. 21). Though the social model has had its uses—especially in framing disability as a social justice issue—some in the disability community have found that the distinction between disability and impairment is exclusionary, as the editors of Disability in Kidlit ("FAQ", n.d.) explain:

Disability is a complex thing. We try to be inclusive, rather than exclusive. Even if you don’t consider chronic conditions, neurological differences, or mental illnesses to be disabilities—the editors do, for the record—there are many commonalities in how they’re depicted in popular media and treated in real life, which makes them relevant to our website.

Furthermore, activists and others have noted that model’s inadequacy in encompassing those with chronic illnesses and less visible disabilities, including mental illness. Indeed, Linton (1998) notes that the disability community has accepted a broad definition of disability—and some have begun calling for a third major model. As a result, an inclusive model of disability will undergird the analysis in this paper.

**Disability representation in middle grade and young adult novels**

Representation of disability has not gotten the same amount of attention as other
aspects of marginalization in the fields of education and library science, though that is slowly beginning to change (e.g., Curwood, 2013; Dunn, 2015). Still, disabled children and teens need the same kinds of positive representations as other teens. But how are disabled characters being shown in novels aimed at teens and tweens?

**Research questions**

The research questions for this paper are:

1. How has disability been represented in recent middle grade and young adult novels?

2. How can critical theories and disability studies lens deepen the conversation on the quality of that representation?
Literature review

There has not been much work done in the library and information science field or other areas of study about representations of disability in middle grade and young adult literature (with a few notable exceptions, including Patricia A. Dunn's 2015 book, *Disabling Characters: Representations of Disability in Young Adult Literature*). This literature review pulls together existing research in the importance of representation of youth marginalized in other ways, and the work done in the field of disability studies and literary studies of disability to show why it is crucial for teens to see themselves in the books they read. I will also discuss the language of disability and the inclusion of disability as a marker of identity.

**Representation and identity formation**

Our literacy experiences shape who we are and how we see the world. Literacy feeds identity; identity feeds literacy. We cannot separate who we are from what we read, hear, and view.

—Voices from the Middle

Scholars, activists, educators, and others have long talked about the importance of authors from all walks of life, all colors, all creeds, all genders, all sexualities, all body shapes and sizes, and all levels of ability (e.g., Bishop, 1990a; Bishop, 1990b; Adichie,

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2 Voices from the Middle [VoicesNCTE]. (2018, March 23). “Our literacy experiences shape who we are and how we see the world. Literacy feeds identity; identity feeds literacy. We cannot separate who we are from what we read, hear, and view.” - The Nerdy Book Club. #WisdomWednesday #NCTEVoices. [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/voicesncte/status/976413375944187904?s=12
Bishop (1990a) coined the idea of windows, mirrors, and sliding-glass doors. Children and teenagers need to see themselves in literature, and this analogy helps illustrate why. Mirrors allow children and teens to see their own experiences reflected back at them, while windows allow them to see into other worlds and cultures—and sliding glass doors allow them to use their imaginations to walk on through. Still, certain children have many more mirrors than others. Data collected by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (Tyner, 2018) show that white children are more likely than youth of various racialized identities to see themselves in picture books; of the approximately 3,700 books the center received in 2017:

- 9.19 percent included African or African American content or characters; however, only 3.3 percent of the books received were #OwnVoices stories about Black cultures or characters;
- 1.95 percent included representations of Native American or First Nations characters or cultures, but only 1.03 percent of all books were #OwnVoices stories;
- 8.38 percent included Asian or Pacific or Asian or Pacific American content or cultures, but that total drops to 7.41 percent when factoring in own voices authors; and
- 5.84 percent included representation of Latinx cultures or characters, but that drops to 4.49 percent when taking the author into account.

The mirrors for racialized children are much smaller than they are for white children. The negative impact of never seeing oneself or own culture reflected positively or
at all in literature cannot be overstated. Lin (2016), a Chinese American children's book author and illustrator, talked about her experience growing up as one of the only Asian girls in her school and how she never saw any Asian characters in the books she loved to read. As a result, she buried the markers of her identity: “I decided early on that I wasn't Asian. ... I remember in third grade, I was walking down the street, and I saw my reflection in a store window. And I said, 'Hmm, there's a Chinese girl there,' and then I thought, 'Oh, wait, that's me.' I had spent so much time pretending that I wasn't Asian that I really did forget that I was” (1:53). It was easier for Lin to push aside her identity because she only found windows in the books she read and in real life. This is also true for disabled children. Gavigan (2013) notes that bibliotherapy has been used to help students with cognitive disabilities, such as Down syndrome, attention deficit disorder (ADD)/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia: “Reading a book about characters with cognitive disabilities like their own can be therapeutic for students with cognitive disabilities. When the characters are represented in literature in authentic and accurate ways, it helps them identify with the characters' experiences and frustrations” (p. 139, emphasis added).

This conversation has begun to broaden. The CCBC also began collecting data on other aspects of marginalization—in this case, gender, religion, disability, and sexual orientation—and the preliminary data show similar unsettling trends. An early analysis of nearly 700 picture books received in 2017 showed that a picture book protagonist was four times more likely to be a dinosaur than a Native child and twice as likely to be a

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3In Gavigan, 2013: Bibliotherapy is the “use of literature to help children understand themselves, and to cope with problems relevant to their personal and developmental needs” (p. 139).
rabbit as an Asian or Pacific Islander child; female children had a high likelihood of being shown wearing pink or a bow, even if they were not human; and a disabled child showed up in only 21 books and only two were protagonists—most of the rest showed up in the background (Horning, Lindgren, Schliesman, & Tyner, 2018). When asked for clarification as to what constituted disability, Tyner responded:

We count books that have primary or significant secondary characters with disabilities. Whenever possible, we count disabilities as they are identified in the text or illustrations of a book, e.g. when a text states that a character is on the autism spectrum, or when a character is shown using a wheelchair in the illustrations. We take note of characters with physical, intellectual, cognitive, communicative, psychiatric, and other disabilities, including chronic and mental illness (2018).

When children are limited in who they see in the media they consume, it limits them to single stories (Adichie, 2009) about their world, which can limit their imagination and cause them to view those not like them as other and less than. Children and teenagers also need to see those who are different from them in literature, to help them build empathy to those who do not look or act like them and to build cultural competency (e.g. Bishop, 1990a; Bishop, 1990b; Reese, 2000; Doll & Garrison, 2013; 11/27/18 8:14:00 AM.

Gavigan (2013) notes that reading literature with characters with cognitive disabilities also benefited nondisabled students by helping them “better understand the challenges of being disabled, and [encouraging] them to be more responsive to disabled students' needs” (p. 139). Indeed, Ayala (1999) found four reasons why it was important to include materials with disabled characters in them that echo Bishop’s calls for more mirrors and windows: Disabled people need to see ourselves in media; a focus on “relevant, authentic” media can help draw children and young adults to reading (p. 103); books can help meet the needs of a group of children that comprise an increasingly large segment of the population; and books can help children make connections with people who are not
like them.

However, disability is often excluded—consciously or not—from calls for inclusion generally (e.g., Shandra, 2018) and specifically for more diverse literature for children and teens. For example, in February 2015, the National Council of Teachers of English adopted a resolution on the importance of diversity in children's and young adult literature. While the statement describes a variety of marginalization points, there was no mention made of disability:

The absence of human, cultural, linguistic, and family diversity in children’s and young adult literature attests to the growing disparity and inequity in the publishing history in the United States. Stories matter. Lived experiences across human cultures including realities about appearance, behavior, economic circumstance, gender, national origin, social class, spiritual belief, weight, life, and thought matter (National Council of Teachers of English, 2015, para. 1).

When people say there needs to be more diversity in literature, they often mean racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. These are absolutely areas that require a tremendous amount of improvement; the abysmal statistics from the Cooperative Children's Books Center's annual reports shows just how poor the representation of people of color is in children's literature. However, disabled children need to see ourselves in books, as well. As Dunn (2015) notes, disability is an aspect of marginalization that has not seen the same level of critical scrutiny as race, class, gender, age, income level, sexual orientation, or ethnicity (p. 1). In the introduction to Diversity in Youth Literature: Opening Doors Through Reading, editors Naidoo and Dahlen (2013) suggest such a narrow definition of diversity “is a limited practice that fails to fully embrace the full spectrum of diversity within the United States as well as the scope of considerations for developing inclusive

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4 See the annual statistics published by the Cooperative Children's Book Center in Madison, Wisconsin, on multicultural literature, www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/books/pstats.asp
library and classroom practices” (p. xiii).

Disability

“Yes, I'm ill. I'm an epileptic—that's my lot. It isn't easy and it isn't very enjoyable but this is what I've got to live with. This is who I am, and I don't think I'm insane. I don't think I should be locked up and I don't think I need to be cured of it for my life to be good. But no one seems to agree with me on that.”
— Mackenzi Lee, The Gentleman's Guide to Vice and Virtue

The language of (dis)ability

Before getting into a discussion of disability, it is important to note the terms that will be used in this paper and why these terms, and not others, will be used to refer to those with and without disability. As Dunn (2015) notes, the terms “disabled” and “abled” set up a binary that is not only false but also confirms being able-bodied as the norm and as desirable. Able bodies cannot exist in isolation; the concept of nondisabled can only define itself in contrast to disabled: “Such definitions exist within the cultural context of what abilities are valued, and therefore what ableness means. One category of meaning constitutes the other—so that able-bodied and disabled as ontological groups can only exist mutually” (Newcomb, 2016, p. 210). Disabled people have, however, long been used to reinforce who is normal and who is not:

The history of disabled people in the Western world is in part the history of being on display, of being visually conspicuous while politically and socially erased. The earliest record of disabled people is of their exhibition of prodigies, monsters, omens from the gods, and indexes of the natural or divine world. From the New Testament to the miracles at Lourdes, the lame, the halt, and the blind provide the spectacle for the story of bodily rehabilitation as spiritual redemption that is so essential to Christianity. From antiquity through modernity, the bodies of disabled people considered to be freaks and monsters have been displayed by the likes of medieval kings and P.T. Barnum for entertainment and profit in courts, street fairs, dime museums, and sideshows. Moreover, medicine has from its beginnings exhibited the disabled body as what Michel Foucault calls the “case,” in medical theaters and other clinical settings, in order to pathologize the exceptional and to normalize the ordinary (Birth of the Clinic, 29). Disabled people have variously been objects of awe, scorn, terror, delight, inspiration, pity, laughter, or
fascination—but they have always been stared at (Garland-Thomson, 2008, pp. 216-217).

This deficit approach reinforces the harmful narratives about disability that have existed for as long as there have been people; Smith and Erevelles (2004) note, “Disability has a history. However, until recently, this history has been largely invisible. It is a history dominated by systematic violence against a class of people who were seen as skirting the borders of what was considered 'human' ” (p. 31). Linton (1998) takes it a step further, arguing that disabled people and our experiences have purposely been kept outside mainstream narratives and out of view. Now, however, disabled people are becoming more visible by refusing to stay in the spaces designated for us—special education classrooms and segregated shuttles and cloistered institutions—and by refusing to act the way what Garland-Thomson (1997) calls “normate” society expects them to act:

We further confound expectations when we have the temerity to emerge as forthright and resourceful people, nothing like the self-loathing, docile, bitter, or insentient fictional versions of ourselves the public is more used to. … And we are not only the high-toned wheelchair athletes seen in recent television ads but the gangly, pudgy, lumpy, and bumpy of us, declaring that shame will no longer structure our wardrobe or our discourse. We are everywhere. (Linton, 1998, pp. 3-4, emphasis added).

This urge to keep disabled people hidden may be at least partially the result of what Quayson (2007) calls the “negative comparison to what is typically construed as corporeal normality” (p. 4). He suggests that given the historical and oftentimes religious view that disability is punishment for the disabled person’s sins or that of their parents, it is unsurprising that disability is often seen to absorb the negative attributes of those who also live on the margins of society. Indeed, many cultures have similar biases against disabled people and seek to physically or metaphorically keep them hidden from view (Linton, 1997; Mitchell, 2008). This affects the stories told about disabled people and the
ways disabled people relate to those stories.

But if not “disabled” and “abled,” what language will be used? Through the years, a variety of often paternalistic terms have been used to describe disabled people; Linton (2008) notes somewhat caustically that these loaded terms are usually used by those without disabilities: “Terms such as physically challenged, and able disabled, handicapable, and special people/children surface at different times and places. They are rarely used by disabled activists and scholars (except with palpable irony)” (p. 175, emphasis original). Despite some arguing that this sensitivity to the language of disability is a recent phenomenon, Biklen and Bodgen in 1977 noted, “Society’s misconceptions about people with disabilities are reinforced by negative, handicapist terms—terms like ‘cripple,’ ‘spastic,’ ‘idiot.’ Continued use of these words contributes to the negative self-images of disabled people and perpetuates handicapist attitudes and practices” (p. 5).

Some disabled people have begun taking back slurs—such as cripple, gimp, and freak (Linton, 2008)—as means of reclaiming their identity, turning words outsiders hurl at them as insults into a badge of pride.

Even so, some, often nondisabled, people have argued for what is known as people first language, e.g., a person with autism, instead of identity first language, e.g., an autistic person. With this construction, the person comes before the disability or impairment. While this language seeks to show the humanity of disabled people—something Smith and Erevelles (2004) note has been denied throughout history and continues to be denied in some quarters—it is often used to ease the discomfort of so-called allies in confronting disability. Brown (2011) encapsulates the subtle difference between the two phrases:
Ultimately, what we are saying when we say "person with autism" is that the person would be better off if not Autistic, and that it would have been better if he or she had been born typical. We suppress the individual's identity as an Autistic person because we are saying that autism is something inherently bad like a disease. Yet, when we say "Autistic person," we recognize, affirm, and validate an individual's identity as an Autistic person. We recognize the value and worth of that individual as an Autistic person -- that being Autistic is not a condition absolutely irreconcilable with regarding people as inherently valuable and worth something (para. 17-18, emphasis original).

To put it another way, in his video series for Serious.tv, “Shutting Down Bullsh*t,” activist and actor Dylan Marron spoke with four people on the autism spectrum in his video “Shutting Down Bullsh*t About Autism 2.” In this video series, Marron says the unkind, ignorant, or harmful things people say to oppressed people and allows them to respond to why these statements and beliefs are untrue. In this case, to introduce the topic, he said, “I'm woke, so I say person with autism, not autistic person” (Marron, 2017, 0:01); one of the panelists, Lydia X.Z. Brown, replied, “Most of us prefer autistic. Like, if I'm not a person with Asian-ness or a person with queer-ness or a person with trans-ness, why the hell am I a person with autism?” (0:04). People first language, then, precludes the idea that disability can be a part of a person's identity in the way that race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender orientation can be: “Rather than maintaining disability as a secondary characteristic, disabled has become a marker of the identity that the individual and group wish to highlight and call attention to” (Linton, 1998, p. 13, emphasis original). Even so, some disabled people prefer people first language, and their preference should be respected. However, this paper will use “disabled” and “nondisabled,” phrasing that centers disability.

Still, what broad terms to use when describing disabled and nondisabled people is not the only issue when dealing with language and disability. As noted in the introduction, people use the language associated with disability in their everyday speech;
examples include the casualness with which people described surprising or outrageous events as “crazy” or using “retard” or “retarded” as a casual put down, much in the same way people use “gay” as a generic insult. As with the metaphoric use of “cripple” or “blind,” for example, Linton (2008) suggests that people use these words because of their evocative power, without thinking critically, or at all, about what latent messages they communicate with their word choice. As a result, the use of these phrases can tell us something about how the dominant nondisabled culture views disability. The metaphors we use are both shaped by culture and shape it. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphor is pervasive throughout language and that it illuminates our attitudes and thoughts about a variety of subjects; the way we use language, especially metaphorical language, shows “what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people” (p. 3). Metaphor is so intricately wrapped up in how we view the world that we often do not even realize it. Lakoff and Johnson use how often war metaphors creep into everyday speech to illustrate their claim:

“It is important to see that we don't just talk about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we do in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war” (p. 4, emphasis original).

Western English-speaking cultures have this warlike view of arguments that colors how we see engaging in confrontation. But not every culture views arguing in this way; instead, the metaphors we use to talk about arguments illustrates how we engage in it. The same is true of the metaphorical language of disability (Cohen-Rottenberg, 2018). Take, for instance, the word crutch; metaphorically, it is often used to show something
that gives unneeded support, as in this passage from Carla Shalaby’s 2017 book⁵: “Still, there was concern that this person would be a crutch for Marcus, academically.” It is clear that the thought is that Marcus will be getting help that the writer does not believe he needs. Still, consider what a crutch or a cane is to a disabled person: It is something that allows them to move throughout a world that is not made for them more easily and, perhaps, with less pain. Because being nondisabled is viewed as the desirable norm, markers of disability are also often viewed in a negative light—and the language reflects that.

Society has divorced the original meanings of those words from the metaphoric ones; even so, the casual use of these words to describe mostly negative behaviors or events—e.g., “That girl is crazy!”—sends a clear, if perhaps unintentional, message about the people who live with these disabilities, in this case mental illness. It increases the stigma attached to these disabilities and the people who have them. Even when an author uses them to subvert negative stereotypes, some readers may miss it; Dunn (2015) asserts that readers—who—consciously or unconsciously—hold ableist views might simply read over the fact that they were supposed to disapprove of the bad behavior and, instead, have their own views reinforced. The use of slurs can also alienate the very readers who are meant to feel safe reading the work. Librarian and author Lily Anderson (2018) shared a story about a 10-year-old patron who read a book in which a side character uses an anti-gay slur:

The book uses it to highlight how mean the side characters are. But my student only saw the word, only felt the hatred. She put the book down and cried. … This student saw that slur and believed that the author had turned on her. Because she's 10 and art has turned on her before. I told her that the author was trying to prove a

point. That I've read this book and it isn't written from a hateful lens. But she still put it down. I have said it before and I will keep saying it: Marginalized people don't need to hear slurs to know characters (or flesh and blood folks) are no good. It only salts a never-closed wound.

Additionally, the words used by nondisabled people to describe those with disabilities bear examining, as they can send similar ableist messages. People talk of overcoming a disability; passing as nondisabled; or being afflicted with or suffering from an illness, being wheelchair-bound, or being a victim of a disease or condition. Though perhaps well meaning, these phrases are problematic in their own right and show the pervasiveness of ableism by highlighting common, often unstated assumptions about disability and disabled people and making explicit “the tensions embedded in stories of overcoming disability, passing as not disabled, and coming out as disabled. Disability is not necessarily a curse or a horrible affliction, it is not a static state, and it is not always something to be cured” (Lewiecki-Wilson & Brueggemann, 2008, p. 3).

The idea of overcoming a disability is often coupled with the contradictory notion of not seeming disabled; this is similar, but not identical, to colorblind racism, the idea that acknowledging race and the effects of racism is itself racist. Colorblind racism is sometimes expressed in the contradictory notion of being a credit to one's race. In both cases, there is an edge wrapped in the so-called compliment of not seeming a member of the group; as Linton (1998) asserts, “To accept it, one must accept the notion that the group is inferior and that the individual is unlike others of the group” (p. 18). Moreover, the idea of overcoming a disability puts to onus on the disabled person to act a certain way, to break down barriers by the sheer force of will, and to not let ableist assumptions and blockades—a lack of accessible washrooms, for example, or the insistence that all students remain still and silent while test-taking—wear them down. If it is up to the
individual disabled person to overcome these barriers, there is no need for protests or legislative fixes; nondisabled members of society, then, get a pass. As Linton notes, (1998), the idea of passing is similarly ableist—and racist and queermisic. Regardless of the context, passing reinforces the idea that white, straight, cis, and nondisabled are both the default and the most desirable. In the case of disability, it can also prevent people from getting the assistance they need to navigate the world. For example, glasses or contact lenses are assistive devices. Without them, people would not be able to move through the world: They could not drive, could not see the board at the front of the classroom, could not easily navigate unfamiliar city streets. Yet, no one shames people who get glasses; no one tells them they are giving up because they wish to see more clearly. Additionally, glasses and contact lenses do not eliminate the disability; instead, they mitigate it. By contrast, when disabled people get mobility aids—such as wheelchairs, walkers, and canes—they are often told they are giving up; they are not overcoming their disability. However, many disabled people view these devices differently; Twitter user Coffee Spoonie (2018) notes, “I use one. It’s an accessibility device. It makes things accessible. The stigma is trash, but I am happy to be able to access things again. My wheelchair gives me freedom & mobility. Very ungrim.”

Similarly, the words used to describe people's relationship with their disability also bear hidden messages; afflicted with, victim of, suffering from, and similar phrases are loaded terms. Linton (1998) asserts, “Using this language attributes life, power, and intention to the condition and disempowers the person with the disability, rendering him or her helpless and passive” (p. 25). Luckily, there is an easy solution, as Linton and many others in the disabled community have suggested; if one must refer to a person's
disability, use the neutral phrasing, “She has arthritis.” Has—unlike suffers from, afflicted with, or victim of—confers no additional meaning.

**The models of disability**

There are two main models when talking about disability: medical and social. As discussed in the introduction, the medical model of disability focuses on the disabled person’s body or mind and the ways it is different from a nondisabled person’s body or mind. Basically, those who subscribe to the medical model view disability as a problem or deficit that exists within a person. Disability activists and many scholars find this model limiting at best and harmful at worst; under the medical model of disability, the disabled person must want to get well and must work to the exclusion of all else to do so. The goal is to be, functionally, nondisabled. The goal is a cure.

From a doctor’s perspective, a disability is wrong because it deviates from the ideal norm built up during years of training and practice. But for the patient, disability simply is the norm. There is nothing wrong with me. In fact, for a fifty-five-year-old woman with multiple sclerosis, I’m just about right. … And I’m far more likely to thrive if you don’t regard me as sick at my very core (Mairs, 2008, p. 234).

The issue with this framing of disability, in addition to making it the individual’s problem to overcome, is that it makes it difficult to navigate a culture that is formed with only nondisabled people in mind and in which disabled people are viewed as different or wrong: “For many people with disabilities, the main disadvantage they experience does not stem directly from their bodies, but rather from their unwelcome reception in the world, in terms of how physical structures, institutional norms, and social attitudes exclude and/or denigrate them” (Goering, 2015, para. 2, emphasis original). Indeed, disabled people have worked for years to change this framing of disability:

From at least the 1980s, the main interest of scholars in this field [disability...}
studies] has been to shift the discussion of disability away from the medical
discourse that had dominated such discussion previously and to see disability as
woven out of a range of problems connected to the architectural environment, the
public-transport system, and most important, to the ill-concealed social attitudes
that attend people with disabilities. In this regard, the term disability is no longer
taken as referencing the notion of a reduced ability deriving from an impairment,
but speaks to the built and social environments that generate difficulties for the
disabled person’s capacity to live a full and fulfilled life (Quayson, 2007, p. 2).

By contrast, the social model of disability has gained traction among many
disability advocates and activists. In short, the social model marks the difference between
impairment and disability, “identifying the latter as the lack of fit between a body and its
social environment” (Goering, 2015, abstract). As a result, disabled people do not see the
impairment as a lack; disabled is simply another way to be. The social model, a
sociopolitical frame, focuses on changeable institutional and architectural problems that
disable people—such as a lack of ramps to get into buildings or subtitles when showing
movies, policies that police how people must be or act, and unnecessary job
restrictions—and attitudes that do the same. Nondisabled people’s expectations about a
disabled person’s quality of life, where or whether they will work, or other negative
preconceptions can have a disabling impact as disabled people internalize society’s
ableism (Goering, 2015; Paterson, 2001; Soffer & Chew, 2015). The social model frames
disability as a social justice issue: “Disability is a form of discrimination, coined at times
‘disableism’ or ‘ableism’. Disability can[,] therefore, be cured or treated only by granting
persons with disabilities civil rights and debunking social inequalities” (Soffer & Chew,
2015, p. 172).

There are, however, limitations to the social model. The social model of disability
was crucial because it broke with the medical model of disability and showed that
disability is a social construction that defined disabled people as an oppressed group;
however, like all models, it has limits. Some disability activists say it has become a barrier as it promotes a false dichotomy between independence and dependence (Carlson, 2016). Moreover, for many with chronic illnesses—which take a variety of forms, including autoimmune diseases and mental illnesses—their impairments are not constant. These illnesses may require ongoing medical care, and symptoms can fluctuate in intensity over short periods of time or for longer durations. Some people with these chronic illnesses may indeed seek a cure or at least some form of relief from their symptoms—though this does not mean that they fall under the medical model (Goering, 2015). Indeed, the chronic illness may cause the disability; to say that all disability is constructed is to erase the experiences of many people with chronic illness. As a result, they fit within neither model.

The ways people view disability has real-world impact (Soffer & Chew, 2015). We can see this in the ongoing fights in the United States about healthcare and preexisting conditions and whose lives have value. In a small study, Soffer and Chew (2015) found that five themes around disability emerged in their interviews with disabled and nondisabled teens: disability as deviation from the norm, disability as something to be overcome, disability as inability, the environment’s role in disability, and disability as something negative (p. 173). They found that the nondisabled teens in the study, more so than the disabled ones, defined disability as a lack; they were more likely to subscribe to a medical model of disability, while disabled teens were more likely to hold views more closely aligned with the social model. Troublingly, the researchers also found evidence that the nondisabled teens in the study equated disability with immorality: "Disability as a negative phenomenon is the most troubling finding in our study. It suggests that disability
signifies 'badness', that disability has become a metaphor for foul phenomenon and a moral designation in Western culture” (p. 176). Moreover, the pervasiveness of the medical model has led to disabled people’s reluctance to talk about the realities of our experiences, including pain, limitations, or other difficulties; being frank about this can lead to nondisabled people feeling justified about their negative and harmful perceptions of disabled people’s lives (Goering, 2015, para. 8).

**Disabled youth**

Disabled children comprise a small but growing segment of the U.S. population; in 2010, 5.2 percent of all schoolchildren—or, in real numbers, some 2.8 million children and teenagers—qualified as disabled under federal guidelines (Brault, 2011). Brault's parsing of U.S. Census data used the definition of disability cited under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a fairly narrow definition meant to determine who qualifies for support services provided by public school districts under the law. More disabled children live outside of metropolitan areas than within them; about 6.3 percent of school-age children living outside a metro had a disability, compared with 5.0 percent living in a city. Children with cognitive disabilities often had other disabilities, as well, showing how varied disability can be. Similar percentages of disabled and nondisabled children were enrolled in public or private schools or not enrolled in school at all; the vast majority of children (89.4 percent of school-age disabled children and 86.2 percent of school-age nondisabled children, respectively) attend public schools.

The Annual Disability Statistics Compendium, which compiles and integrates multiple sets of publicly available data on disability in the United States, and its report on disabled people within the country in 2016 presents a fuller picture. The number of
people living with disability in the United States has increased since 2010 from 11.9 percent to 12.8 percent in 2016 (Kraus, Lauer, Coleman, & Houtenville, 2018). West Virginia had the highest percentage of its population identify as disabled, and the highest concentration of disabled people live in the Southeast, though there are also pockets in the Northwest. Some 5.6 percent of the population aged 5-17 years old are disabled, and that age group comprised 7.3 percent of disabled people in 2016. Most disabled youth live in the eastern and southern United States. The report also delves into the six types of disability asked about on the American Community Survey: hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, self-care, and independent living, the definitions of which are shown in table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vision difficulty</td>
<td>Blindness or serious difficulty seeing even when wearing glasses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing difficulty</td>
<td>Deafness or serious hearing difficulty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive difficulty</td>
<td>Serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambulatory difficulty</td>
<td>Serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-care difficulty</td>
<td>Difficulty bathing or dressing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent living difficulty</td>
<td>Having difficulty going outside the home to shop or visit a doctor's office.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

In 2016, the percentage of youth 5-17 years old living with hearing disability was 0.6 percent, with vision disability was 0.9 percent, with cognitive disability was 4.2 percent, with ambulatory disability was 0.6 percent, and with self-care disability was 1.0 percent; no data are collected on children and youths with independent living disabilities.

Though disabled children and teenagers do not make up a large section of the U.S.
population in terms of percentages, there are, in fact, millions of disabled youths in the country, and they deserve to see good representations of themselves and others with disabilities like and unlike theirs in the books they read.

**Tropes versus disabled people**

I am in Sunday school: “You can do it if you believe.” I see Jesus cleansing lepers, giving sight to the blind, making the lame walk. He heals them all and then leaves them behind. In the fresh air of the Swiss Alps, the orphan girl Heidi tells her crippled cousin, Clara, “You can do it; just try.” In the fresh air of a secret garden, another orphan girl, another crippled cousin: “You can do it; just try.” As a child I loved these stories; they speak to the fundamental optimism of childhood. Part of me still believes them, or wants to. But now I yearn for a Bible story about a cripple who isn’t cured.


For as long as humans have been making art, disabled people have appeared; indeed, an analysis of books aimed at young adults published between 1999 and 2005 found that nearly a quarter featured disabled characters (Koss and Teale, 2009). However, the ways in which disabled people have been depicted have not always, or even often, been positive or realistic:

Disability returns the aesthetic domain to an active ethical core that serves to disrupt the surface of representation. Read from a perspective of disability studies, this active ethical core becomes manifest because the disability representation is seen as having a direct effect on social views of people with a disability in a way that representations of other literary details, tropes, and motifs do not offer. In other words, the representation of disability has an efficaciousness that ultimately transcends the literary domain and refuses to be assimilated to it. … To put the matter somewhat formulaically: the representation of disability oscillates uneasily between the aesthetic and the ethical domains, in such a way as to force a reading of the aesthetic fields in which the disabled are represented as always having an ethical dimension that cannot be easily subsumed under the aesthetic structure (Quayson, 2007, p. 19).

Until as recently as the 1980s in the United States, disabled people were kept out of sight, segregated from the general population (Garland-Thomson, 2016; Rose, 2017); as a result, many people had no interaction with those they could easily identify as disabled—making the representation of disabled people in media that much more important.

Literary and disability studies scholars have noted that disabled characters in media tend to fall into one of several categories. These tropes, for the most part, are stereotypical or one-dimensional representations of disabled people that do not allow them to be fully fleshed-out and well-rounded characters; indeed, disabled characters in media often serve to move the plot forward or to show character development in other nondisabled characters.

In one of the earliest studies of fictional representations of disabled people, Biklen and Bogdan (1977) described 10 common stereotypes: pathetic or pitiable, like Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol*; an object of violence, which sees the disabled person being harassed, bullied, assaulted, or killed because they cannot defend themselves as with Lenny in *Of Mice and Men*; sinister or evil, like Captain Ahab—who has a prosthetic leg—in *Moby Dick*; disabled people as atmosphere, where disabled characters are not fully developed and function as background, such as Seb, the brother of the protagonist’s best friend who is described as “special,” in Alice Broadway’s *Ink*; the supercrip, which “defies pity; … [it] represents a sort of overachieving, overdetermined self-enfreakment that distracts from the lived daily reality of most disabled people” (Alaniz, 2014); laughable, like the bumbling Mr. Magoo, who has a visual impairment; their own worst enemy, where disabled people are portrayed as whiners who could accomplish more if
they simply tried harder; disabled people as burdens who are helpless and need constant
care from others; nonsexual, in that they do not want or are not capable of sexual activity;
and “incapable of fully participating in everyday life” (p. 9) and so cannot be good
partners, siblings, parents, employees, etc.

Garland-Thomson (2008) suggests four broad categories that share some overlap:
wondrous, sentimental, exotic, and realistic. Wondrous, she asserts, is the oldest type of
representation of disabled characters, though it still continues to assert itself in modern
representations, as well. This category focuses on physical difference as a source of both
awe and estrangement. Sideshow freaks and the supercrip both fall under this category.
Wonder is, by turns, condescending, paternalistic, and othering; it is living “in spite of”
one’s disability; it is “overcoming” a disability to perform outstanding—or even
everyday—feats. Sentimentalism, by contrast, shows the disabled person as an object of
pity—often one that the nondisabled person can help or save. In fiction, the disabled side
character often acts as the impetus for some action the protagonist needs to take or allows
the protagonist to learn something important. Sentimental portrayals of disabled people
are diminishing and paternalistic; they paint disabled people as helpless and passive,
unable to anything without the aid of nondisabled people. The popular narrative around
Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan, as well as March of Dimes posters, are examples of this.
The poster:

presents disability to the middle-class spectator as a problem to solve, an obstacle
to eliminate, a challenge to meet. In such appeals, impairment becomes the stigma
of suffering, transforming disability into a project that morally enables a
nondisabled rescuer. … Sentimentality makes of disabled people occasions for the
viewers’ own narratives of progress, improvement, or heroic deliverance and
contains disability’s threat in the sympathetic, helpless child for whom the viewer
is empowered to act (p. 220).
The exoticization of disabled people presents them as “alien, distant, often sensationalized, eroticized, or entertaining in their difference” (p. 220). It presents disabled people’s bodies as not normal, as different, as less than—as something to be gawked at. Exoticized representations of disabled people serve to distance them from nondisabled people. Finally, realistic depictions of disabled people show us as we are—though they can still be negative if it shows the reader or viewer what they do not want to be. “Realism minimizes distance by establishing a relation of contiguity between the viewer and viewed. The wondrous, sentimental, and exotic modes of representation tend to exaggerate the difference of disability to confer exceptionalism on the object of the picture. The rhetoric of the realistic, however, trades in verisimilitude, regularizing the disabled figure. … Realism domesticates disability” (p. 221).

In Quayson’s (2007) typology, the more central to the story the disabled character is, the more likely they are to fall into one of the nine categories he describes: disability as null set and/or moral test, in which the disabled character acts as a way for the nondisabled characters to show their character; disability as the interface with otherness (race, class, and social identity), which is often used to show the superiority of the nondisabled protagonist; disability as articulation of disjuncture between thematic and narrative vectors, which is illustrated by Dory’s character in “Finding Nemo,” in that the nondisabled characters often minimize and discount her contributions; disability as bearer of moral deficit/evil, which gives readers insight into a character’s moral standing; disability as epiphany, which is often combined with a disabled character’s death to give the nondisabled protagonist some insight, as in the adult novel “Me Before You”; disability as signifier of ritual insight, which is often seen in mythology; disability as
inarticulate and enigmatic tragic insight, which is often related to the trope of disability being the bearer of insight and is illustrated in the myth of Cassandra; disability as hermeneutical impasse, which implies a lack of closure or resolution in the story; and disability as normality (p. 52).

Like Quayson’s typology, Baglieri and Shapiro's (2012) typology also contains nine categories, though it is less esoteric. They found representations of disabled characters often fell within one or more of these categories: the object of pity; the subhuman organism; sinister/evil; the unspeakable object of dread; the holy innocent or eternal child; the object of comedy, ridicule, or curiosity; the burden; the victim of violence; or the supercrip or extraordinarily disabled. An object of pity is often a disabled character used as a prop to move the protagonist’s story forward or show the inherent goodness of the protagonist. It often includes the phrases “suffers from” or “is afflicted with” or “is confined to” when describing the disability, and it reflects a “there but for the grace of God go I” view in the author, protagonist, and, often, the reader. It shares features with Garland-Thomson’s sentimental category. The subhuman organism trope is often applied to those with cognitive and intellectual disabilities, though it is also applied more generally. Here, disabled people are compared to vegetables (e.g., “He was in a vegetative state” or “The coma patient is a potato”) or animals. The disabled person as a shorthand for sinister or evil trope is often seen in fairytales, though it is by no means the only place it appears. Captain Hook in Peter Pan is an example of this. The disability is a visible symbol of the character’s immorality. The trope of the unspeakable object of dread is closely related to this but subtly different. In this trope, this disability is seen as punishment for sins—either one’s own, as in The Phantom of the Opera, or one’s
parents’. This trope ties into the historical view of disability in the United States, in which disabled people were seen as the embodiment of their parents’ sins (Rose, 2017). The holy innocent or eternal child depicts disabled people as special children of God or eternally sunny, happy people. This is often applied to those with developmental disabilities and is illustrated by the character Forrest Gump in the movie by the same name. This trope, too, is often used as a foil or a backdrop for nondisabled characters to show their goodness by how they treat this character. Disabled people as objects of comedy, curiosity, or ridicule have their origins in the freak shows that were often part of circuses and fairs in the 1800s and early 1900s. Dopey Dwarf, Porky Pig’s stutter, and Elmer Fudd and Tweety Bird’s speech impairments are all played for humor and serve to make them seem less than people. The trope of disabled people as burdens are common throughout media, and it has a negative real-world impact; if disabled people are burdens, then their natural human rights to care become gifts bestowed upon them by the beneficence of their caregivers and of society. Disabled people as the victims of violence is closely linked with the object of pity and holy innocent tropes. Quasimodo in The Hunchback of Notre Dame is a well-known example of this in literature. Finally, the supercrip or extraordinary disabled trope is common in comics, especially superhero comics, and genre fiction, especially speculative fiction, such as science fiction and fantasy.

Onyx (2017a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i) explored nine types of disability tropes: villainous disability, exemplified by Darth Vader, in which the villain’s disability is shorthand for their brokenness and immortality or their mental illness is used to make them more threatening; inherent in the bitter disability trope, as seen in Shakespeare’s
Richard III, is the “assumption that disability is a terrible, life-destroying tragedy that prevents people from having fulfilling lives. After all, if these characters did have fulfilling lives, they would have no reason for bitterness” (Onyx, 2017b, para. 3); with the cosmetic disability trope, as with Luke Skywalker’s mechanical hand, the disabled character gets an upgrade or device that renders them functionally nondisabled; helpless disability, as exemplified by Dickens’ Tiny Tim, shows disabled people as victims of violence, as burdens upon those around them, and as lacking agency; inspirational disability, which includes a variety of tropes, such as developmentally disabled people as eternal innocents, disabled people getting in their own way, a bad attitude is the real disability, disabled people as heroes for simply living their lives, and as a means to shame or encourage nondisabled people into doing something—all of these tropes dehumanize disabled people, and their inclusion in media is not meant as a character abled people are supposed to relate to; the magical cures and disability as an obstacle trope reinforces the ableist notion that being able-bodied is the most desirable and that disabled people should seek a cure, whether through invasive surgeries and prescription drugs, diet and exercise, or sheer persistence; in the fragile body, magic mind trope, the physically disabled person is given extraordinary mental abilities or superpowers, such as Professor X in the X-Men comics and movies; one-dimensional disability representation, which addresses the idea that disability is an intersection, though many disability stories focus on straight, white, cis men and, to a lesser extent, women, at the expense of disabled people of color and disabled queer people; and metaphorical disability, which includes when the disability is a metaphor for something—usually bad—about the character or something about the world.
Other common tropes not fully or explicitly included in these typologies are disabled people—and especially disabled women—as nonsexual (Carlson, 2016); disabled people as static characters (Napolitano, 2016); inspiration porn (Grue, 2016); magical cures, which is often seen in science fiction and fantasy (Nijkamp, 2014; Onyx, 2017f); magical disabilities, where either the disability causes the character to gain magical or superhero abilities or the abilities cause a disability (Whaley, Razi, & Duyvis, 2016); disabled people being isolated from peers (Rubin & Watson, 1987); the disabled protagonist who wants to be cured (Bardugo et al., 2018); disabled people as incapable of growth (Napolitano, 2016); and disabled people as fakers or malingerers—which has real-world implications for disabled people seeking medical care (Kuperman, 2006).

Indeed, the disability tropes page on TV Tropes, a wiki that deals with various types of tropes in fictional media, lists more than 80 tropes relating to portrayals of disabled people in fiction (“Disability Tropes,” n.d.).

By contrast, Curwood (2013) suggests that positive portrayals of disabled people include high expectations for what the disabled character can accomplish, showing the disabled character’s agency, showing their positive impact on society, and showing them in relationships with disabled and nondisabled characters in which both benefit. Myers and Bersani Jr. (2008) note that books with ableist messages can distort “perceptions of people with disabilities and helps maintain biases and myths about disabilities” (para. 1). Their guidelines for evaluating books for children and teens can help readers more critically engage with media:

- Does the book ignore disabled people?
- Do the illustrations promote a stereotypical depiction of disabled people?
For example, do the disabled people always look happy? Is the disabled character shown in a leadership role, or are they there to convey some sort of message?

- Is the storyline ableist? Is the disabled person there to add tension to the plot or problems for the main characters? How are the disabled characters portrayed, as flat and one-dimensional or as fully realized people? Are they stereotypes?

- Does the author use ableist language? For example, is the disabled character “confined” to a wheelchair? Does the author use ableist metaphors, such as lame, crazy, or blind?

- Do the disabled characters have agency? Does the disabled character get to be the hero, or do they have to be rescued by the hero?

- Does the book support positive self-image for disabled children?

- Is the author disabled? Are they disabled in the same way as their character? If not, have they done research and hired a sensitivity reader?

All of this can help with the evaluation of the quality of the disabled representation.
Methods

This study seeks to examine how concepts of disability have been portrayed in recent middle grade and young adult literature; it also delves into how critical discourse can be an important lens through which to do that examination. This study uses critical content analysis to explore representation of disabled characters in middle grade and young adult literature. Content analysis is “a systematic approach to learning about particular aspects of a body of text or other messages” (Spurgin & Wildemuth, 2017, p. 315). Quantitative content analysis has been used extensively in the field of library and information science, and qualitative content analysis is also gaining momentum within the field. Though critical content analysis has not been used as frequently in the field of library science as in other fields, including education, this is changing—especially when it comes to examining diverse literature and the quality of representation (Curwood, 2013).

Critical content analysis, which seeks to examine power structures to challenge social inequities, uses a critical lens as the frame for the study and for interpreting the findings and gathering materials for a literature review; in short, critical content analysis differs from other forms of content analysis because the critical frame infuses every step of the research process (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017). Researchers using this form of analysis ground themselves in critical theories; in this case, I employed a disability studies lens to the 10 texts I read in order to examine books by nondisabled and disabled authors that include disabled characters for stereotypical and authentic representation. By
specifically incorporating disability studies theories and models in my content analysis, I am taking “a political stance … in searching for and using research tools to examine inequities” (Short, 2017, p. 4). This critical stance leads to questioning social issues and interrogating the way language is used to portray those who are deemed outside the cis, heterosexual, nondisabled, white, male norm (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017, p. 186).

Taking this approach allows me to explicitly ask questions about dominant power structures and challenge texts: “Who is represented, underrepresented, misrepresented, and/or invisible? How is power exercised?” (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. xiv).

Researchers who take this approach believe that texts convey attitudes about the world and, as a result, are not neutral; instead, they nudge readers toward particular readings of the text. Because of this, critical content analysis requires the researcher adopt an investigative stance when dealing with text. This questioning stance is usually used to investigate power structures that seek to oppress marginalized people. “[It] focuses on … the ways language is used to shape representations of others who could be similar or dissimilar to the intended audience. The language used can impact the way readers perceive specific groups of people and by extension influence the power those within the particular groups may or may not have within a specific society” (Short, 2017, p. 5).

Researchers who use a critical framework believe that there is no objective, neutral reality, and that language and media can shape how groups of people—including disabled people—are viewed, though critical content analysis has more often been used to investigate depictions of race, gender, language, culture, and sexual orientation (Short, 2017; Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Freire (1993), who is credited with pushing forth modern critical theory, suggests that using a critical lens involves three parts: critique,
hope, and action. This allows such research to move “from deconstruction to reconstruction and then to action” instead of getting stuck at the stage of tearing down (Short, 2017, p. 6).

**Stages of Critical Content Analysis**

Short (2017) suggests that there are 10 stages of critical content analysis: deciding on a research focus, questions, and texts; reading deeply within a critical theory frame; deciding on and reading books aimed at children, tweens, or teens; exploring the context of the texts and how they are shaped by culture; reading related research; identifying theory that will guide close reading of the texts; examining what the text says about power, closure, and agency; using the previously identified theoretical tenets in close reading the texts; revisiting theory and other texts to develop themes; and choosing relevant passages from the children’s, middle grade, and young adult texts used in the study that shows the critical theory tenets selected (p. 7). The impetus for the focus could come from a variety of sources, including the researcher’s work with students, current events, or the intersection of the researcher’s interests and their effect on young people. Unlike with qualitative content analysis, the specific research question comes from delving deep into the theory and from the texts themselves; the selection of the texts, then, is critical. The texts used in the study can be selected in a variety of ways. The texts may be selected because of the researcher’s specific concerns about them—as was the case with several of the books in this study, including *Wonder, Everything, Everything, Carve the Mark;* and *Girls Like Us.* The researcher may amass a large number of texts to choose from before making their final selections. Researchers may also choose a small number of books to read closely or seek patterns around social issues from a greater
number of books. Regardless, the selection of texts “often involves a careful process of researching many different text possibilities before deciding on a specific text or set of texts for analysis” (Short, 2017, p. 8).

Delving deeply into the literature of critical theory and other relevant texts, including cultural sources outside the academy, helps ground the study; it allows “a frame for analyzing the books [to become] integrated into their thinking as a constant lens through which they interact with their data” (Short, 2017, p. 9). Unlike qualitative content analysis, which focuses on fitting the data into a limited number of codes and using the theory to interpret the data, in critical content analysis, the theory is chosen because the researcher thinks it will be an effective lens to view the data based on their purpose. For this study, I have chosen a disability studies lens and have used it to analyze 10 middle grade and young adult novels for the tropes most commonly associated with disability representation. The tropes used are a synthesis of those discussed in the literature review.

Furthermore, content analysis has been used by a number of studies delving into diverse representation in literature (e.g., Kurtts & Gavigan, 2008; Irwin & Moeller, 2010; Wilson, 2012; Curwood, 2013; Koss, 2015; McAdams, 2015; Ostenson, Ribeira, Wadham, & Irion, 2016; Gangwish, 2017). This study would build on previous work by examining the quality of the diverse representation—in this case, disability.

**Methodology of this study**

This study examined disability representation in middle grade and young adult literature through a critical lens. There were several limiting criteria on what books would be selected: Middle grade and young adult fiction books written in English and published between 2012 and 2018. Manga, graphic novels, picture books, and early readers for
older students were not considered. Though there are certainly disabled characters in older books, this study will focus on the current state of disability representation. However, finding books that include preteen and adolescent disabled characters is not as straightforward as one might hope. A preliminary search of TitleWave, the ordering system for many public school libraries in North Carolina, in February 2018 for the existing tag “disabilities and disabled person” and limited to fiction brought up 360 titles; however, once duplicates, picture books, those not published in English, and those published before 2008 were removed, only 103 books remained. Similarly, a preliminary search of NoveList, a database that helps librarians with readers advisory, in March 2018 for the tag “people with disabilities” for readers ages 0-8, 9-12, and teen limited to fiction brought up 199 books; however, once a publication year limiter was placed on the results, the list narrowed to 84. Once picture books were removed, there were 74 potentially relevant books left—and there was quite a bit of overlap with the TitleWave list.

Tellingly, many books that contained disabled characters whose disability was not the point of the story were left off both lists. Gross, Goldsmith, and Carruth (2008) encountered a similar issue in their attempt to create a comprehensive bibliography of young adult novels that deal with HIV/AIDS. To help ensure that they had an all-inclusive list, they solicited requests from librarian listservs; similarly, I asked colleagues, fellow librarians, and those on social media, including Twitter and Litsy, for recommendations. The list of Schneider Family Book Award winners, which seeks to “honor an author or illustrator for a book that embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences” (“Schneider Family Book Award | Awards & Grants,” n.d.), were also considered. For the most part, these sources—
with the notable exception of my colleagues in graduate school—brought up stories in
which the disability was the point of the story. While some of those books were included,
I am also particularly interested in stories with disabled characters whose disability is not
their defining characteristic.

From those and other sources, mostly my own personal knowledge of books with
disabled characters, I compiled a list of more than 170 books that is by no means
comprehensive. From there, I created a spreadsheet that tracked, among other things,
title, author, publication year, how I learned of the book, the author’s disability status, the
disabilities represented in the work, audience, any awards, number of Goodreads reviews,
whether there were any professional reviews, and whether I had access to the book. The
mention of reviews was included on my spreadsheet for several reasons: to see the reach
and reception of the books and because an earlier iteration of my research questions
included emphasis on reviews. I sought to balance the books chosen by selecting a
roughly equal number of books written for a middle grade audience and those written for
a young adult audience; I also purposely selected books that encompassed a wide variety
of disabilities: stutter, learning disability, Amelia (the medical term for the absence of a
limb or limbs at birth), autism, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), Deaf or hard of
hearing (HoH), trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), missing limbs through
injury, epilepsy, depression, anxiety, limp, chronic pain, addiction, seizure, attention
deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), life-threatening allergies, developmental
disability, club foot, facial disfigurement, and fibromyalgia. I sought out books that had
received awards for the high quality of the disability representation, those that had
become well known for the poor quality of the disability representation, and those that
were popular with disabled people or nondisabled people for a variety of reasons. Moreover, I sought books across a variety of genres and with a mix of disabled and nondisabled authors. The books I selected and analyzed were *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio; *Everything, Everything* by Nicola Yoon; *Carve the Mark* by Veronica Roth; *Girls Like Us* by Gail Giles; *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind* by Meg Medina; *The Gauntlet* by Karuna Riazi; *Six of Crows* by Leigh Bardugo; *The Gentleman’s Guide to Vice and Virtue* by Mackenzi Lee; *Pinned* by Sharon G. Flake; and *Paperboy* by Vince Vawter.

In examining these works, I used the criteria for examining the quality of disability in young adult literature proposed by Dunn (2015):

- How disability is represented in the text;
- Who benefits and who loses as a result of the representation in the text;
- Whether and how harmful stereotypes, narratives, and tropes about disability are cultivated or disrupted—or both; and
- What purpose the disabled character serves.

I also kept in mind the tropes discussed in the literature review, though I condensed and combined them:

- Object of stares, which also includes the object of pity and the object of curiosity;
- Helpless disability, which also includes the tropes of the object of violence and lack of agency;
- Metaphor for badness, which includes the tropes of disability as sinister or evil and the object of dread;
• Magical cures, which also includes the tropes of cosmetic disability and the disabled protagonist who wants to be cured;

• Disability as atmosphere, which also includes one-dimensional and background disability;

• Inspirational disability, which includes the tropes of the supercrip, holy innocent, magical disability, and inspiration porn;

• Laughable and objects of ridicule;

• Disability as less than, which includes the tropes of disabled people as burdens, getting in their own way, nonsexual, incapable of fully participating in life, incapable of growth, and subhuman organism;

• Disability as the moral test, or a way for the author to tell the reader something about the protagonist; and

• Disability as normality.

I also noted where such tropes were subverted or used by the author in more nuanced or interesting ways, though, as noted by Dunn (2015), readers who hold ableist views can miss the subtleties of such a maneuver. Finally, I noted instances of ableist language or slurs because the way we talk about disability and disabled people affects how we view disability and real-life disabled people (Quayson, 2007; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Cohen-Rottenberg, 2018): “We do not live outside of language. How we use language constructs who we are as people, as cultures, and as a society. Language circulates the dominant ideologies of gender, race, and class” (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 2).
Findings

*Pinned*

*Pinned* (Flake, 2012) is a middle-grade contemporary novel about two Black teens: Autumn, her school’s only female wrestler who also struggles to read, and Adonis, an honor student who uses a wheelchair because he was born without legs from the knees down. Autumn loves Adonis, whom she describes as perfect for her, but Adonis thinks he is too good for her because she is not a good student. In the marketing copy and metadata, Autumn is billed as having an unnamed learning disability because of her struggles with reading and math; though she is in high school, she reads at a middle school level. However, as the story progresses, we learn that Autumn’s difficulties with reading are the result of her moving a lot and changing schools as often as twice each year. Eventually, she says, she just stopped trying. It is unclear how much of her difficulties with math and reading are the result of a learning disability and how much are the result of disruptions and deciding to focus on what she is good at, namely wrestling and cooking. For his part, Adonis is good at everything; he gets impeccable grades, volunteers at school, tutors other disabled and nondisabled kids, and is the darling of parents, teachers, and administrators alike. He is incredibly good-looking: “Muscled arms. Wavy brown hair. Eyes so big and black, they glow. They all add up to me. Perfect” (p. 28). Teachers ask him to come in and help struggling students, and he is one of two students chosen to show state officials around the school.

This novel contains a variety of stereotypical depictions of disability: inspirational
disability, helpless disability, disability as a metaphor for badness, objects of staring, disability as atmosphere, and disability as less than. Both Adonis and Autumn—if we set aside the question of whether she is, in fact, disabled—fit the sub-trope of the supercrip. Flake never lets readers forget about Adonis’ disability or the fact that he has accomplished everything he has despite his disability. His is the narrative of overcoming described by Garland-Thomson’s (2008) wondrous and sentimental tropes. Adonis is also extremely good-looking; he is often described as perfect. Unlike the nondisabled characters throughout the book, Adonis—who is named after a literal god—is held to a high standard. He has to be the smartest, the best looking, the most driven—and still, what he is known for is being disabled. Autumn, on the other hand, is not good at everything the way Adonis is, but she excels at two things: wrestling and cooking. She does both at a level that everyone around her, adults included, are shocked by, especially given the way she struggles at math and reading.

The two main characters also experience little growth, which fits into the trope of disability as less than; the biggest difference between the start of the novel and its end is that Autumn and Adonis are in a secret relationship by the end. Autumn’s negative behavior toward Adonis—following him around, touching him, and even kissing him, all without his consent, denying his agency—is never addressed in any meaningful way. Nor is Adonis’ rudeness toward Autumn and anyone who does not live up to his exacting standards. Indeed, the narrative seems to want readers to believe Autumn is a good person solely on the basis of her attraction to Adonis; she notes that Adonis is cute, despite his lack of legs (p. 10). Still, Patricia, nicknamed Peaches, Autumn’s best friend, tells her that Adonis is not good enough for her simply on the basis of his disability: “‘He don’t treat
you right. And he’s handicapped. Look. No legs.’” (p. 6).

There are other disabled characters in *Pinned*, those Adonis tutors and the others who ride in a van to get to school. Many of them do not even get names, and the others are flat characters who serve to make Adonis more exceptional by comparison. Autumn also notes how other they are:

Down come a boy in a wheelchair that got a tray attached to it. His arms is frozen in place. His head wobbles, like there ain’t no bones in his neck. I try not to stare at the girl coming off next. But I do anyhow. She walking. But not so good. Two canes and leg braces help her get around, but she always look like she gonna fall down. I’d be embarrassed to ride in that van. Adonis ain’t (p. pp. 3-4).

These disabled teens are described through a deficit perspective; Autumn shows what they cannot do, focusing on how they are different from nondisabled people. Indeed, even Adonis compares disabled and nondisabled people, calling the latter “the regulars” throughout the novel.

Violence against disabled people is common in fiction and in the real world; in 2014, the rate of violent crimes against disabled people was 2.5 times higher than that of nondisabled people (Harrell, 2016). But focusing on violence against disabled people in fiction is problematic for a variety of reasons, including that it reduces disabled people to the things that happen to them. In *Pinned*, a group of teens attacked Adonis, destroyed his wheelchair, and threw him into a pond. Adonis cannot swim and would have drowned had someone not called the police. The attack was retribution; Adonis had told school administrators that a fellow student had stolen a test. Though the violence happens off the page and before the novel starts, Adonis struggles with the repercussions throughout *Pinned*. It shows the lack of agency that is often integral to fictional depictions of disabled people. It also changed how he viewed himself: “I yelled for Patricia until I was
hoarse that day. Clawing mud. Trying to keep my face above the water. Sliding under, I’d come up coughing. Holding my arm up high, I begged her. I had never wished for legs. That day, I did” (p. 65).

Though *Pinned* is touted as a book that tackles disability, ableist language is strewn throughout its pages. Stupid, crazy, and dumb show up most often, though other slurs and words used as slurs appear, as well: lame, idiot, ADD, slow, mentally ill, disabled, and illiterate.

**Girls Like Us**

Like *Pinned, Girls Like Us* (Giles, 2014), deals with the fallout from acts of violence against disabled people. Biddy, who is white, and Quincy, who is Black, are both disabled, and after graduating from high school, they move in together after being matched by a program that helps disabled people live independently. Biddy is developmentally disabled, but Quincy’s disability comes as a result of violence; her mother’s boyfriend hit her in the head with a brick when she was a child. Quincy’s injuries left her disfigured: “They’s still a big ole dent in my head, and one of my eyes is push down. My face look like somebody put both hands on it and push up on one side and pull down on the other” (p. 2). The story positions both women’s disabilities as the result from the sins of their mothers: Quincy’s mother was a drug addict, and Biddy’s abandoned her.

Both women have been raped: Biddy before the story begins, and Quincy on the page. Biddy’s rapists told her she was asking for it, that she was so pretty that they could not help themselves, and she responds by making herself what she considers to be not pretty: She wears shapeless clothes and eats a lot of junk food to gain weight. The
narrative never pushes back on the idea that fat is inherently unattractive, and that had Biddy not been thin and, therefore, pretty, she would not have been raped. Quincy is raped by a man she works with and one of his friends. Biddy is the one who finds her in an alley behind the store; Quincy is in such bad shape that she is described in pieces, as if she is not human. The men carve slurs into her chest and stomach and threaten to kill her if she tells. Though the rate of violent crimes (such as rape) against disabled people is three times the rate of that against nondisabled people (Harrell, 2016), having the only two disabled people in the story experience a violent attack reduces disabled experiences to a single story. Though many more disabled people experience crime than nondisabled people, not all do.

Biddy lacks agency throughout the novel. She is gang raped by some young men at her school. Her grandmother, who raised her after her mother abandoned her, gives the child away without her consent. Miss Lizzy invites the woman who adopted Biddy’s baby to meet Biddy without asking her if that was what she wanted. The few places where she does show agency—in buying food for the ducks on Miss Lizzy’s property, when she waits for Quincy to be done working to walk her home after her rape, when she convinces Quincy not to talk to the police about her rape—it is about her helping someone else or showing her sweet disposition.

Biddy is a fairly stereotypical representation of someone with a developmental disability. Quincy describes her like this: “I swear, Biddy don’t know up to hide a thing. Everything she think just hop up and sit on that ashy white face for anybody to see. Her face brighten up like somebody turnt on a lamp in front of a mirror” (pp. 7-8). Miss Lizzy, the old woman Biddy and Quincy live with, repeats this, calling Biddy “an angel
come down to earth” (p. 15). She cries when Quincy asks her to lie to Miss Lizzy (p. 28). She has other emotions—she gets upset when someone calls her fat or when she talks about her rape—but her default is to be a sunny innocent who loves everyone and just wants to help. She is also often the butt of Quincy’s jokes; Quincy mocks her sunny disposition, her weight, and her desire to help others throughout the novel. Her cruelty to Biddy becomes a shorthand for her badness: “I don’t know how to let go a grudge. It’s like it grows onto my body and get to be a new part of me” (p. 132).

Like *Pinned*, *Girls Like Us* included a lot of ableist language: retard and retarded, speddie (short for special education), differently abled, mentally challenged, dumb, fool, stupid, crazy, and loony.

**The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind**

Meg Medina’s 2012 book, *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind*, is a prime example of the trope of the disabled character as atmosphere and as a catalyst that shows something about the main character. The protagonist, Sonia Ocampo, is thought to be a holy girl, someone who could intervene with God on behalf of the people in her village. She is a good girl; Medina shows that Sonia Ocampo is good in multiple ways, including her off-the-page friendship with Luis, who “had been born with a lame leg, the right foot limp as a dead fish” (p. 20). When Luis goes missing, some in the village believe that he may have decided to leave the rural community for the opportunities of the big city. But Sonia does not believe he could do it because his disability makes it impossible to do things without the help of the nondisabled people in his life: “But how would Luis make a trek through the valley? Steep hills always made him topple despite his special shoe; climbing left him wheezing. Without Rafael as a companion, who would carry his pack?
Who would help him over the boulders the way she sometimes did?” (pp. 21-22). Despite Sonia's prayers and her listing all of the kindness he had shown throughout his life, Luis does not get a happy ending. Instead, the boy gets a gruesome and horrific death in order to spur Sonia to leave the small, mountain community herself:

“Friends,” the police chief began. “Today I have a sad obligation.”
The villagers abandoned their conversations and crowded in like sheep to brace themselves. A covered cart was beside the mounted men on the road.
Capitan Fermin did not dare look at Senora Clara, who was already tearing at her hair and wailing. Nor did he even try to stop Sonia from walking unsteadily to the cart when she spotted the worn sole of a familiar thick-heeled shoe.
She pulled back the canvas. Black flies buzzed at Luis's eyes, half opened and fixed on her in accusation. Thieves had turned his hip pockets out. His thick hair was matted with blood where their bullets had blasted through his skull.
“I thought it was a dead animal on the tracks,” Marco told the stunned crowd. (p. 26).

Some of the villagers blame Clara, Luis’ mother, for his life, his disability, and his gruesome death, playing into the trope of disability as a metaphor for badness. Indeed, the portrayal of Luis falls prey to several common tropes: object of staring, helpless disability, disability as atmosphere, disability as the subhuman organism (he is compared to animals on multiple occasions), disability as less than, disability as the moral test, and disability as a metaphor for badness. Luis' death—and Sonia's reaction to her failure to save him—is what allows her to stand up to her family and convince them to let her leave, despite the villagers' fear that, without Sonia, horrible things will happen to the community. The only time Luis appears on the page, he is already dead. References to him, and his “dead fish” right foot, center that which is different from the nondisabled norm and the things he could not do: walk down hills, carry a pack with his belongings, live. Luis' entire purpose in The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind is to get Sonia to go to the Capital.
But Luis is not the only disabled character who exists only in relation to Sonia. Old Gaucho, who is blind and sick from a life of working in the mines; her father, who is hard of hearing for the same reason; and Cuca, who injured her hand and whose temporary disability was seen as proof of some sin she was hiding, all act as backdrops to showcase Sonia’s goodness.

_The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind_ also included a variety of ableist language: deaf ear, madness, stupid, mute, lunatics, crazy, cripple, imbecile, and dumb.

**Paperboy**

_Paperboy_ (Vawter, 2013) is an #OwnVoices story set in the 1950s about an 11-year-old white boy, Victor, who stutters. The disability itself is portrayed in an authentic way; Victor, whose name readers do not learn until the very end of the book, tells his story on a typewriter. He does not stutter on every word, but instead he experiences blocks and gets stuck with certain sounds. He uses Gentle Air, exhaling on words he cannot say. Instead of reading through a lot of repeated letters when Victor is talking, we read through “s-s-s” as he uses that technique. Victor has friends. He plays baseball and is good at it. He has a life. Still, this story, despite too many plotlines, is about Victor’s stuttering. When Victor’s best friend Art, whom he calls “Rat” because his stutter will not let him say Art, goes to visit his cousins, Victor takes over his paper route; he is nervous about collecting the money each Friday because of his stutter: “The reason I hate talking to people who don’t know me is because when they first see me I look like every other kid. … But when I open my mouth I turn into something else” (loc. 71-78). Most of the people Victor meets treat him differently because of his stutter, at least at first. Victor also spends a lot of time wishing he did not stutter: “I would forget what they were saying and
start pretending that I was a puppet and wishing that somebody would pull the strings to make my mouth move so I didn’t stutter” (loc. 490). He also says he wishes he could honk a horn instead of talking, like Clarabell the Clown: “Me honking the horn all the time would look stupid but not as stupid as some of the things I did when I tried to say words” (loc. 499). Victor gets embarrassed by his stutter: “I probably get over things that hurt faster than most kids. I don’t have much of a choice seeing as how my stuttering hurts me so many times during a day” (loc. 994). Similarly, some of the people around Victor act as though his stutter makes him an object of ridicule. When he goes out to dinner with his parents and some of their friends, he decides to order spaghetti; however, he could not say the word, so he added extra syllables to turn the word into something he could say: “shplishghetti.” This made several of the adults at the table laugh at him. This, of course, makes him feel broken, like there is something wrong with him: “I couldn’t get out one simple word without ruining everybody’s night out” (loc. 920). He says he cannot wait to be a grown up because he hopes to outgrow his stutter. Though disabled people can feel embarrassed or resentful of their disabilities or wish for a cure, the paucity of stories about disabled people makes these representations problematic as they can lead to the belief that all disabled people want a cure or wish to be nondisabled.

Victor personifies his stutter in a negative way. When he hears an argument between Mr. and Mrs. Worthington, he runs away: “Part of me wanted to go back and ring the doorbell again with my make-believe sword but the stuttering part of me said to ride away. That was the part I usually listened to” (loc. 782-791). He believes his disability makes him a coward, that it means he is bad in some way he cannot change. At the end of the book, we learn Victor’s name—Victor Vollmer the Third—and the
inspiration porn lesson he learned from being able to say his name in class: “s-s-s-s And my soul doesn’t s-s-s-s-stutter” (loc. 2354). This shows that, even at the end of the novel, Victor still believes his disability means there is something wrong with him.

Though readers get a full picture of what life was like in the 1950s for an 11-year-old white boy who stuttered, other disabled characters in Paperboy are not treated as kindly. A character Victor calls TV Boy, whom we eventually learn is Deaf, is portrayed as rude, unintelligent, and stuck up because he does not talk to Victor and watches TV all day. Mrs. Worthington is depressed and an alcoholic; when we first meet her, she accuses Victor of calling her a bitch, when he was actually practicing words he struggled to say—in this case, pitch. She does inappropriate things when she drinks, including flirting with Victor, inviting him into her home, passing out on her couch while he is there, and having affairs with other men. Ara T, a homeless Black man who collects junk, has what Vawter calls fits but is likely schizophrenia. His disability is shorthand for his badness: He steals from Victor; beats up Mam, Vince’s Black housekeeper; and nearly kills Mam and Vince at the story’s climax. Disabled people are far more likely to have violence perpetrated against them than to perpetrate it against someone else (Harrell, 2016). Again, there is not anything inherently wrong with including disabled villains; however, because of the paucity of stories that show the range of disabled peoples’ lives, this reliance on the trope of disability as villain continues to be harmful.

Unsurprisingly, Paperboy includes ableist language: retard, stupid, dumb, mute, and deaf.

**Carve the Mark**

*Carve the Mark* (2017) is an #OwnVoices story about living with chronic pain; as
a result of the controversy surrounding this book, author Veronica Roth revealed that she has fibromyalgia, which causes widespread musculoskeletal pain, fatigue, and sleep and memory issues in around 4 million Americans⁷, mostly women. Of the five stories written by disabled authors included in this study, Carve the Mark had the most stereotypical depiction of disability. It includes nearly all of the tropes mentioned in the methods section. Carve the Mark is a dystopic science fiction set in a world where everyone gets a currentgift, a sort of magical superpower. The story follows Cyra, the sister of the tyrannical ruler of the Shotet, and Akos, who was kidnapped from the peace-loving Thuvhe by the Shotet. Cyra’s currentgift is pain; she is constantly in pain and can inflict it on others. It manifests in the form of currentshadows that move beneath her skin and become darker and more numerous the more pain she is in. Akos’ gift is that he cannot feel the current, and the current cannot feel him; as a result, he can touch Cyra without pain and relieve her pain.

Cyra’s currentgift, and her pain, surfaced when she was 9 years old; this is one of the few instances of relatively positive portrayal of disability in the book, as an estimated 25 to 35 percent of children worldwide live with chronic pain that is often under- or undiagnosed (Friedrichsdorf et al., 2016). Roth’s descriptions of chronic pain—how it pushes people away, how it robs you of the ability to do certain tasks, how it can blot out everything else—is, in some ways, an authentic depiction of living with chronic pain. However, taken in concert with the rest of the story, it functions to turn Cyra into a supercrip and an inspiration; her bravery in pushing through turns her into something

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women with chronic pain are often turned into: warriors. The text makes it explicit:

“I liked to practice—not because it made me a stronger fighter, though that was a/welcome side benefit—but because I liked how it felt. The heat building, the
pounding heart, the productive ache of tired muscles. The pain I chose, instead of
the pain that had chosen me” (p. 96).

Instead of showing an authentic portrayal of a disabled young women, Roth positions
Cyra’s existence and continued desire to live as the brave acts of a fighter. She is not
allowed to show the depths of her pain because that would be a weakness. Indeed, Cyra is
judged based on her usefulness to other nondisabled people in her life, namely her
brother, Ryzek, and Akos, her love interest. This is a common ableist frame for disabled
people: That we are only useful insofar as we can inspire or entertain nondisabled people.
For Cyra, that mostly means inspiring fear; her brother often uses her as a threat or as a
means of controlling the populace by having her use her abilities to cause pain to his
enemies, often in a public spectacle. This turns her into an object of dread and into
something less than human; people take to calling her Ryzek’s Scourge. She lacks agency
on several fronts. She must hurt the people Ryzek tells her to hurt. But her pain is
described like it is a living thing, like it can decide who and how much to hurt others;
Cyra’s pain is given more agency than Cyra herself: “The shadows crept toward him,
even as I silently begged them not to move. But I was not their master. I never had been”
(p. 308).

Indeed, Cyra is so inhuman, she even killed her mother with her abilities: “‘I
touched her, and I pushed all the light and all the pain into her, all because I was
angry. … All she wanted to do was help me, but I threw a tantrum, and it killed her’ ” (p.
158). Having Cyra’s pain be the cause of her mother’s death is incredibly problematic.
So, too, is the fact that her mother’s unrelenting search for a cure is positioned as a
positive, even as her use of painkillers and Akos to help her manage her pain is positioned as a negative. This pushes a harmful narrative that all disabled people do and should seek to be as close to nondisabled as possible. That narrative is reinforced by Akos; when he touches Cyra, her currentshadows dissipate. He notes that the pain makes her ugly, that she is more beautiful without the shadows:

His fingers rested on her skin, dimming the shadows that flowed through her. It was easier, without them, to see that she was beautiful, her hair in long, loose curls, shining in the shifting light, her eyes so dark they looked black. Her aquiline nose, with its fine bones, and the splotch next to her windpipe, a birthmark, its shape somehow elegant (p. 290).

However, the most problematic aspect of Carve the Mark from a disability standpoint is that the very premise itself is ableist: Cyra’s chronic, debilitating pain is positioned as a gift. It is called a currentgift. Currentgifts are shaped by the current’s interaction with the individual; the gift is something personal to each individual. That means Cyra’s pain and the pain she can inflict on others comes from something inside her that believes she and those around her deserve to hurt. And in case the symbolism was too subtle, Roth makes it explicit throughout the text:

“That your daughter’s gift causes her to invite pain into herself, and project pain into others, suggests something about what’s going on inside her,” Dr. Fadlan said. “It would take further study to know exactly what that is. But a cursory assessment says that on some level, she feels she deserves it. And she feels others deserve it as well.” “You’re saying this gift is my daughter’s fault?” The pulse in my mother’s throat moved faster. “That she wants to be this way?” Dr. Fadlan leaned forward and looked directly at me. “Cyra, the gift comes from you. If you change, the gift will, too” (p. 55)

And again:

“She is herself a small Ogra,” the third dancer said, and the bones in her fingers flickered with light, just as shadows wound around my arms like bracelets. “All clothed in darkness.” “It is a gift,” the light-handler said. “It is a gift,” the chest-drummer echoed (p. 74).

And again:
“That your daughter’s gift causes her to invite pain into herself, and project pain into others, suggests something about what’s going on inside her,” he said. “A cursory assessment says that on some level, she feels she deserves it. And she feels others deserve it as well” (p. 309).

And again:

“The gift comes from me,” Cisi said. “It’s an expression of my personality. So I guess I don’t see a difference.” It was, essentially, what Dr. Fadlan had said to my mother in his office, that my gift unfolded from the deeper parts of me, and it would only change as I changed. …

“So you think causing people pain is a part of my personality?” She frowned as she helped me guide my head and arms into the clean shirt. The short sleeves were far too baggy for me, so I rolled them up, leaving my arms bare. “You want to keep people away,” Cisi said finally. “I’m not sure why pain is the way your gift accomplishes that. I don’t know you” (pp. 383-384).

Pain is not a gift. It does not give a person magical abilities that can be used to heal a divided world. This positioning also makes the chronic pain Cyra’s fault; after all, if the gift comes from her, then she can stop it, if only she would stop getting in her own way. However, when Cyra’s current gift finally does change, it is not because of her own work; instead, it is because of Akos:

“You saw me as someone better than I was,” I said. “You told me that I could choose to be different than I had been, that my condition was not permanent. And I began to believe you. Taking in all the pain nearly killed me, but when I woke up again, the gift was different. It doesn’t hurt as much. Sometimes I can control it.” I took my hand away. “I don’t know what you want to call it, what we are to each other now,” I said. “But I wanted you to know that your friendship has . . . quite literally altered me” (p. 387).

This is an extraordinarily problematic framing of chronic pain. People who live with chronic illness and chronic pain are often told we should just try any number of things—yoga, a change of diet, a positive attitude—to help mitigate or cure what ails us. But love and friendship do not cure chronic illness, and it is dangerous to suggest that they do.

In addition to the ableist stereotypes woven throughout this narrative, Roth also uses a variety of ableist language: crazy, imbecile, insanity and insane, stupidity and
stupid, idiot, mad and madness and madmen, fool and foolish, blinding, mania, and delusion.

**Wonder**

*Wonder* (Palacio, 2012) is a story about Auggie, a 10-year-old boy who lives with facial disfigurement; Palacio decided to write the book after her child reacted poorly to seeing disfigured child. It is a book about disabled people by a nondisabled woman for nondisabled people. In Auggie’s case, Palacio created a version of disfigurement that does not exist, making him more disfigured than is likely to happen in real life: “I won’t describe what I look like. Whatever you’re thinking, it’s probably worse” (loc. 96). The story is mostly told from Auggie’s perspective, though his friends, his sister, and his sister’s boyfriend also get to tell part of the story, which is about Auggie and his disfigured face and him deciding to go to school for the first time. This is a quintessential inspirational disability story.

Though Auggie does not describe himself, Palacio clearly wanted readers to know just how Auggie looks; so, his sister, Via, tell us: His eyes sit about halfway down his face, tilted at odd angles. The left is lower than the right, and both bulge out. Top and bottom eyelids sag. He has no eyelashes or eyebrows. His nose is huge. He has no visible ears. He has no cheekbones. His face is pinched or stretched in places, giving him a waxy complexion. He has scars around his mouth. His teeth point outward, and he has an overbite (loc. 1172). Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that Auggie is a disabled protagonist who seeks a cure: “If I found a magic lamp and I could have one wish, I would wish that I had a normal face that no one ever noticed at all” (loc. 88). He notes that his family are all good-looking and often harps on his own appearance. He asks his mother, “Why do I
have to be so ugly, Mommy?” (loc. 857). Auggie’s internalized ableism is not challenged in any way in the text. His feelings about his face are reinforced by others; he is often the object of ridicule or staring. Indeed, that is one of the reasons why he does not want to attend school, at first. When he gets to Beecher Prep, he finds that his fears were warranted:

I could tell I was being stared at without even looking up. I knew that people were nudging each other, watching me out of the corners of their eyes. I thought I was used to those kinds of stares but now, but I guess I wasn’t (loc. 728).

The staring ties in with Auggie’s status as the school freak, as something less than human; multiple times throughout the story, he compares himself to various animals or science fiction creatures. That Palacio has Auggie refer to himself in this way augments his inhumanity.

Auggie acts as a foil for a variety of characters. Readers know Summer is good because she decides to sit with Auggie without one of the teachers having to ask her. Other kids call her a saint for befriending Auggie, and Summer notes that she sat with him at first because she pitied him; she very clearly sees him as an object of pity, though the story seems to think that is a good thing. Similarly, Auggie’s mother; his sister’s friend, Miranda; his sister’s boyfriend, Justin; his friend, Jack Will; and various others are positioned as good people simply for treating Auggie with basic human courtesy. But kindness to disabled people is not a high bar, and it should not be taught as an extraordinary act.

Conversely, readers know Julian is bad because of how he treats Auggie. Julian does not look at Auggie when he talks to him. He asks him rude questions about why he looks the way he does, even going so far as to compare him to a Star Wars villain:
“Who’s your favorite character?” Julian asked. I started thinking maybe he wasn’t so bad.

“Jango Fett.”

“What about Darth Sidious?” he asked. “Do you like him?” …

Maybe no one got the Darth Sidious thing, and maybe Julian didn’t mean anything at all. But in Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith, Darth Sidious’s face gets burned by Sith lightning and becomes totally deformed. His skin gets all shriveled up and his whole face just kind of melts.

I peeked at Julian and he was looking at me. Yeah, he knew what he was saying (loc. 645-657).

Julian does these things before he is revealed to be the villain in Auggie’s story; as a result, nondisabled people may read over these microaggressions and have their own ableist behavior reinforced (Dunn, 2015). Julian goes on to do worse things to Auggie, including perpetrating a game called the Plague, wherein students need to avoid touching Auggie. If they do touch him, they have 30 seconds to wash their hands or use hand sanitizer, lest they catch the plague; this further renders Auggie a subhuman organism, and it is not adequately addressed in the text. Furthermore, several kids say they would kill themselves if they looked like Auggie, which feeds the idea that being nondisabled is the desired norm and that being disabled is undesirable and bad.

Indeed, throughout the novel, the nondisabled people shy away from using the language of disability. After Auggie has a bad day at Beecher Prep, he does not want to return. Via tries to get him to reconsider: “[E]veryone will treat you like a kid who should be going to a school for kids with special needs. Is that what you want?” (loc. 1518).

When Julian’s mother wants to know why Auggie, whom she refers to as a child with special needs, was allowed into Beecher Prep, the headmaster’s response is that Auggie is not disabled:

As for your other concerns regarding our new student August, please note that he
does not have special needs. He is neither disabled, handicapped, nor developmentally delayed in any way (loc. 2086).

What message is the refusal to use the word disabled sending to middle grade disabled and nondisabled readers alike? It, again, reinforces the idea that being disabled is undesirable.

Like in *Pinned, Girls Like Us, The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind, Paperboy, Carve the Mark, The Gentleman’s Guide to Vice and Virtue, and The Gauntlet*, Auggie becomes a victim of violence in *Wonder*. While at an overnight field trip, a group of boys from another school attack Auggie because of how he looks; as a result of the attack, his hearing aids get destroyed. The attack is positioned as a net positive for Auggie, though, because some older boys at his school stand up for him, and it makes everyone at Beecher Prep treat him better. Their eventual kindness to him is condescending and patronizing and reeks of ableism. Turning Auggie into a school mascot is not true friendship.

Finally, among *Wonder’s* many flaws is its reliance of an ableist inspiration porn narrative. Auggie often gets praise for doing completely normal things: going to school, being a brother, having friends. But the biggest inspirational moment is when Auggie gets an award from his school simply for existing. The Henry Ward Beecher medal is given to students who have been “notable or exemplary in certain areas throughout the school year” (loc. 3770). It is usually given to a student who has volunteered to help the community throughout the year. However, it soon becomes clear the headmaster, Mr. Tushman, means to give it to Auggie because of the theme of his speech: courage, kindness, friendship, character. Tushman notes: “‘Greatness,’ wrote Beecher, ‘lies not in being strong, but in using the right kind of strength. … He is the greatest whose strength
carries up the most hearts” (loc. 3791). Auggie’s reaction to receiving the medal shows his internalized ableism and drives home the ableism that has undergirded the whole story:

I wasn’t even sure why I was getting this medal, really.
No, that’s not true. I knew why.
It’s like people you see sometimes, and you can’t imagine what it would be like to be that person, whether it’s somebody in a wheelchair or somebody who can’t talk. Only, I know that I’m that person to other people, maybe to every single person in that whole auditorium.
To me, though, I’m just me. An ordinary kid. (loc. 3818)

Nondisabled people who have not yet examined their own ableism may think it is heroic for disabled people to simply go about our lives, but it, like so many other things about this book, simply reinforce the idea that to be disabled is bad, and that disabled people should want to be nondisabled.

Unsurprisingly, ableist language abounded in *Wonder*: dumb and dumbest, lame, panic attack, crazy, blindly, stupid and stupidest, freak, idiot, moron, addiction, manic, retarded, unstable, obsession, and imbeciles.

**Everything, Everything**

*Everything, Everything* (Yoon, 2015) is a romance between a seemingly disabled protagonist, Madeline, and the nondisabled boy next door, Olly. At the beginning of the book, we are led to believe that Maddy has Severe Combined Immunodeficiency, or SCID, which, in short, means that she is allergic to everything. She cannot go outside. She lives in her house in a protective bubble with only new things that have been sterilized multiple times before she is allowed to use them. Her house has special filters and airlocks and round-the-clock medical care. Unfortunately, this is not a story about a
disabled 18-year-old falling in love with a nondisabled one and the ways they navigate that relationship. The plot twist is that Madeline is not, in fact, sick; her mother has what is likely Munchausen by proxy syndrome, where a parent either fakes a sick child or makes the child sick. After Maddy’s father and brother were killed in a car accident, her mother took drastic steps to ensure that Maddy would never get hurt or leave her: She gave her child a rare illness that meant she could not go outside without risking death.

This is a story of child abuse with a mentally ill parent. As a result, this book embraces the deeply problematic narrative that disabled people cannot have happy endings. For Maddy to get her happy ending, she has to be nondisabled. The other two disabled characters in the story—Maddy’s mother and Olly’s father, who is an abusive alcoholic—do not get happy endings: Maddy’s mother loses the person she cares about most, and Olly’s mother leaves her husband.

*Everything, Everything* is problematic long before the big reveal, however. Maddy believes that she is a burden to those who care about her, especially her mother:

> For the thousandth time I realize anew how hard my disease is on her. It’s the only world I’ve known, but before me she had my brother and my dad. She traveled and played soccer. She had a normal life that did not include being cloistered in a bubble for fourteen hours a day with her sick teenage daughter (loc. 468).

This framing ties into the trope of the disabled person as less than, and it is closely related to the trope of the disabled person being unable to fully participate in life that is the heart of this story. After Maddy’s mother makes her break off contact with Olly, Maddy sees Olly with another girl:

> My mom’s words come back to me. *I don’t want you to have a broken heart.* She knew what would happen. There was always going to be someone else. Someone who isn’t sick. Someone who can leave her house. Someone he can talk to and touch and kiss and everything else (loc. 1934).
Being in relationships with disabled people is too difficult—at least according to Yoon’s *Everything, Everything*. Of course, Olly would choose to be with someone nondisabled. And, of course, Maddy would want to change that. Throughout the story, she longs for a cure. This intensifies after she meets Olly. Maddy also deals with a lot of unaddressed internalized ableism, believing that her life is worthwhile only inasmuch as it looks as nondisabled as possible:

> Ever since Olly came into my life there’ve been two Maddys: the one who lives through books and doesn’t want to die, and the one who *lives* and suspects that death will be a small price to pay for it. … The second Maddy knows that this pale half life is not really living. (loc. 2024-2034)

Maddy believes her life only has value if she can do the things nondisabled people do.

Unsurprisingly, this story features a strong narrative of inspiration porn. Early on in the book, Maddy’s at-home nurse Carla tells her, “You’re the strongest, bravest person I know. You better believe that” (loc. 501). Carla, a medical professional, also lauds Maddy for not getting depressed—as if depression, a mental illness that cannot be staved off by willpower or a cheerful spirit, would mean she somehow failed as a disabled person:

> When I first started with you I thought it was only a matter of time before depression would take you over. And there was that one summer when it came close, but it didn’t happen. Every day you get up and learn something new. Every day you find something to be happy about. Every single day you have a smile for me” (loc. 501.

In addition to inspiration porn, this is a prime example of the trope of the eternally cheerful disabled person who never lets her disability get her down. Similarly to Cyra in *Carve the Mark*, Maddy is expected to be a fighter but never show the strain. This is harmful to real-life disabled people who have depression or who, as actual human, have down days. Disabled people are allowed to be brave, sure. But we are also angry and
scared and passionate and a thousand other things. Reducing us to inspiration robs us of our depth and our humanity.

The two actually disabled characters in *Everything, Everything* are not portrayed authentically or sympathetically. Maddy’s mother, a doctor, constantly worries about Maddy’s health to the point of being controlling. She panics when Maddy leaves the house for a minute and guilt trips Maddy to get her to not do it again. When she finds out Carla has been letting Olly come into the house, she fires her. After Maddy runs away and is brought back quite sick, something the mother had kept hidden for nearly 20 years starts breaking free until eventually the truth comes out. The words used to describe Maddy’s doctor mother are telling: uncertain, not quite right, confused, broken, madness, damaged. She is disability as the metaphor for badness—for what else could you call a mother who made her own child sick? Olly’s father, an abusive alcoholic, is cartoon villain bad; he never has a positive interaction with any other character on the page.

*Everything, Everything* includes a variety of ableist language: blind, crazy, insane, dumb, idiot, crackpot, crippled, and madness.

**The Gauntlet**

In *The Gauntlet* (Riazi, 2017), a middle grade fantasy novel, Ahmad, who has ADHD, impulsively runs into the Gauntlet of Blood and Sand—think: Middle Eastern *Jumanji*—and gets trapped; his sister, Farah, and her two friends must go in after him and play the game, all in hopes of rescuing all the children who have been trapped there. Riazi is herself disabled, though it is unclear whether she has ADHD.

The portrayal of Ahmad does not live up to the rest of the story, which includes great world building and a lot of diversity. Ahmad is his ADHD, and that is all he gets to
be. He does not have any friends—because of his ADHD. He throws tantrums and
expects presents on other people’s birthdays—because of his ADHD. He cannot control
himself—because of his ADHD. And he gets himself trapped in the Gauntlet of Blood
and Sand because of his poor impulse control, which comes from his ADHD. Farah sees
him as annoying and feels a “guilty, giddy rush of relief” when he rushes off to chase
after his marbles during her birthday party (p. 8). Farah feels sorry for him because his
ADHD makes him obnoxious; indeed, her friends, Essie and Alex, often agree to play
with him out of pity. Most of the descriptions of Ahmad are unflattering and reference his
executive function disorder:

Farah watched his every move. Living with Ahmad had taught Farah that the best
way was to play with one eye forward at all times. Of course you had to worry
about him snatching the dice, having a tantrum, and tossing the Monopoly money
up in the air for no apparent reason, or even slyly sidling a token back with an
extended toe (p. 116).

Ahmad also lacks agency throughout the novel; things happen to him, usually as a
result of his ADHD. He runs into the game without considering the possible
consequences and then wanders throughout the game world, seemingly without a thought
about being rescued—until the end, when he leaves a trail of cheese, so his sister can save
him. Ahmad is the quintessential helpless disabled character. He was also less a fully
fleshed out character than a collection of symptoms read from WebMD.

_The Gauntlet_ only had one instance of ableist language in it: dumbstruck.

_The Gentleman’s Guide to Vice and Virtue_

_The Gentleman’s Guide to Vice and Virtue_ (Lee, 2017) has a little bit of
everything: It is part adventure story, part historical fiction, part romance, and part
speculative fiction—and features a disabled protagonist and a disabled secondary
character. Monty, the protagonist, a white English lord, has post-traumatic stress disorder because of his abusive father, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, and he self-medicates with drinking and sleeping around. Percy, Monty’s biracial best friend, has epilepsy. With both characters, Lee, who is disabled, tends to subvert the usual tropes about disabled characters.

Lee drops clues throughout the story about Percy’s illness: He stops eating meat, a possible reference to advice chronically ill people often receive from nondisabled people to change our diet or try yoga or get more vitamin D; whenever law school, where he is supposedly going at the end of his and Monty’s tour, is mentioned, he gets uncomfortable or changes the subject; Percy often feels vaguely unwell and retires to his room to rest; he makes vague allusions to needing Monty’s presence; he gets pale and sweaty and less conscious of his surroundings. Even during the only epileptic seizure he has on the page—which Lee describes for three pages (pp. 143-145)—Percy remains a person; though Monty is narrating what he is seeing, it is always in relation to Percy. It is not a back arching—it is Percy’s back; it is not limbs going rigid and shaking—it is Percy’s limbs. That keeps Percy from becoming less than, or worse, from becoming a subhuman organism. It comes out that Percy is not going to law school at the end of the tour; his guardians are, instead, sending him to an asylum to die. Eventually, the story becomes one of searching for a magical alchemical cure, at Monty’s behest. But Percy does not want to be cured:

“I don’t want the cure-all. If we find it, I’m not going to use it.”

“Why not?”

“Because … I don’t think I have to be well to be happy. God.” He takes another step away from me, head tipped back to the sky. “I should have said that ages ago” (pp. 430-431).
Percy gets at the heart of it, at something many nondisabled people do not seem to grasp: Disabled lives have value as is—and many people do not want to be cured. Monty’s reaction to Percy’s disability functions as a subversion of the disability as a moral test trope: Monty panics when Percy has a seizure and treats him differently for a while after he finds out. He wants Percy to be cured. That does tell us something about Monty: that he has some internalized ableism he needs to address. Monty has a lot of issues around privilege, but it is good to see a disabled protagonist who is not perfect, who makes mistakes, and who grows. By the end of the novel, he respects Percy’s decision not to seek a cure.

While Percy’s disability is named outright, Monty’s is not. This is unsurprising, given the novel’s setting in the 1700s; post-traumatic stress disorder was not added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) until 1980 (Friedman, 2016). Among the requirements for PTSD are a traumatic stressor outside the range of normal human experience and is “marked by negative cognitions and mood states as well as disruptive (e.g. angry, impulsive, reckless and self-destructive) behavioral symptoms” (Friedman, 2016, para. 7). Monty’s behavior certainly qualifies. Indeed, the suggestion of being alone with his father is enough to trigger his anxiety:

“Mr. Lockwood, Father says, “may I have a moment alone with my son?”
As one, my muscles all clench in anticipation.
One his way out the door, Mr. Lockwood pauses at my side and gives me a short clap on the shoulder that’s so firm it makes me start. I was expecting a swing to come from entirely the opposite direction and be significantly less friendly (pp. 21-22).
As the book goes on, Monty reveals the extent of his father’s abuse, that he beat him often, causing him varying amounts of physical harm until it culminates in the worst
beating of his life, after Monty gets kicked out of Eton for having a romantic relationship with another boy:

I lie for a long time on my back, then my side, then my other side, trying to cozy up and fall asleep and think about something that isn’t how hard it is to be stone-cold sober or my father beating the shit out of me after I was expelled from school. It’s running circles in my mind, all the vicious details of that week—my father’s face as the headmaster explained what had happened. The way that, after a while, he’d been hitting me for long enough that I heard more than felt the blows landing. The exquisite discomfort of the carriage ride home, my ribs rattling around in my chest every time we hit a run and my head packed up tight, like it was full of cotton. All the things he called me that I’ll never forget. … My mother didn’t say a word about why I’d arrived home looking like I’d run face-first into a stone wall at top speed, and the idea of Father being the reason I was swollen and bruised would have been so absurd to Felicity it had apparently never crossed her mind (pp. 120-121).

Even men who remind Monty of his father can leave him “tense and twitchy, waiting for someone to mock me if I say the wrong thing” (p. 42)—though any man reaching for him can cause him to flinch or raise his hands defensively. To cope, Monty turns to “impulsive, reckless, and self-destructive” (Friedman, 2016, para. 7) behavior, including drinking too much, seducing the Duke of Bourbon’s mistress and fleeing Versailles nude, and being a terrible friend and brother. Monty’s drinking veers into addiction: “I want a drink so badly I can hardly think straight” (p. 66). By the end of the novel, Monty has an additional disability: During the search for the panacea for Percy, he gets shot in the side of the head, which results in facial scarring, damage to his ear, and hearing loss in one ear. The Monty we meet at the beginning of the book would have been inconsolable at the loss of his looks. But Lee subverts the trope of disabled people as nonsexual beings in a variety of ways: Of course, Monty gets with people of all genders throughout the novel. But he and Percy fall in love, and Percy’s support makes it easier for him to come to terms with his new face, with his disabilities, and with Percy’s:
My hands are upon his face, mirror to the spot where I’ll carry red, puckered scars for the rest of my life. In his gaze, they seem to matter less. We are not broken things, neither of us. We are cracked pottery mended with lacquer and flakes of gold, whole as we are, complete unto each other. Complete and worthy and so very loved (p. 497).

Ableist language used in The Gentleman’s Guide was fairly minimal and was most often used to refer to Monty in a derogatory way: imbecile, stupid and stupidest, dumb, demented, fool, insanity and insane, and blinds.

**Six of Crows**

Six of Crows (Bardugo, 2015) is a fantasy heist story that follows the infamous Dirtyhands, Kaz Brekker, as he puts together a crew to pull off the impossible—breaking a prisoner out of a high-security facility. Bardugo, a disabled author, modeled Kaz after herself, making this at least in part an #OwnVoices story. In addition to Kaz, there are two other disabled characters: Jesper, who has what Bardugo has called ADHD and self-medicates with high-risk behavior, such as gambling, and Wylan, who has a learning disability (Bardugo et al., 2018). All of the disabled characters feel authentic; their disabilities are neither the entirety of their being, nor an afterthought. Their disabilities are a part of their identities, and it is impossible to separate Jesper from his gambling addiction and his ADHD, Wylan from his inability to read and the problems that have arisen as a result, and Kaz from his PTSD or his chronic pain and limp.

Kaz Brekker is a good example of an authentic disabled character—he has a leg injury that causes chronic pain and uses a cane and also has what we would likely call post-traumatic stress disorder—that subverts many of the ableist tropes often seen in media. Kaz is grumpy and greedy and resourceful and loyal in his own way. He is desirable and desires another character. He is set up to be a stereotypical disabled villain,
someone who inspires dread in others because of his lack of morals. Indeed, in the first chapter with one of the regular point-of-view characters, we hear what people say about him:

Kaz Brekker didn’t need a reason. Those were the words whispered on the streets of Ketterdam, in the taverns and coffeehouses, in the dark and bleeding alleys of the pleasure district known as the Barrel. The boy they called Dirtyhands didn’t need a reason any more than he needed permission—to break a leg, sever and alliance, or change a man’s fortunes with the turn of a card (p. 15).

But Inej—who is a member of the Dregs, the same gang Kaz is a part of—notes that Kaz never does anything without a reason. Furthermore, the reason Kaz inspires dread is not his disabilities; it is because of his actions and his ruthlessness. Even Mattias, who spends half the book calling Kaz a demon, does so because of Kaz’s abilities—his competence, his cunning, his ability to think two steps ahead of anyone else—not because of his disabilities. There is a lot of violence in Six of Crows; however, unlike other stories with disabled characters—including Girls Like Us and the read-alike Carve the Mark—Kaz inflicts most of the damage of his own free will. Though the stereotype for a man with PTSD is to be out of control, Kaz has an iron-fisted grip on everything around him. Like many with PTSD, Kaz is hyper focused on a mission that he feels like he can control, putting everything he has into it. Indeed, the book provides a nuanced portrayal of a teen with PTSD. Kaz deals with intrusive thoughts throughout the book that are often triggered when someone touches him or when he has to remove his gloves, which he wears to avoid skin-to-skin contact. His touch aversion is a symptom of PTSD not often seen in media. Though this could have been played as an obstacle for the burgeoning romance between Kaz and Inej, it is not. Indeed, Kaz gets to want Inej and have her want him back, a subversion of the trope of the disabled person as nonsexual.
Bardugo’s portrayal of someone with chronic pain is authentic. She takes care to mention his cane and show the ways his disability affects him: For example, cold weather and climbing stairs both make his limp worse. Kaz’s disabilities are simply part of him; they are mentioned but not sentimentalized. Despite Kaz’s multiple disabilities, he never becomes a helpless disabled person. Kaz does not lack agency. Indeed, he often uses people’s ableist assumptions against them:

“What’s with that?” Jesper asked, gesturing to Kaz’s walking stick.
Kaz’s laugh was low and humorless. “Who’d deny a poor cripple his cane?”
“If the cripple is you, then any man with sense.”
“Then it’s a good thing we’re meeting Geels” (p.18).

Kaz uses his cane like a weapon throughout the story, smashing those who think he is a poor, weak little cripple (e.g., p. 33). Indeed, he turns his disabilities in weapons, encouraging rumors to flourish to add to his mystique:

As Van Eck’s neatly manicured hand clasped Kaz’s leather-clad fingers, the merch narrowed his eyes.
“Why do you wear the gloves, Mister Brekker?”
Kaz raised a brow. “I’m sure you’ve heard the stories.”
“Each more grotesque than the last.”
Kaz had heard them, too. Brekker’s hands were stained with blood. Brekker’s hands were covered in scars. Brekker had claws and not fingers because he was part demon. Brekker’s touch burned like brimstone—a single brush of his bare skin caused your flesh to wither and die (p. 58).

Kaz knows what people say about him, and he allows it because he kinds it useful to be feared.

Kaz is the antithesis of the helpless disabled trope. Kaz is competent: He has built up the Dregs into a smooth-running criminal organization, and he plans and executes what many believe to be an impossible heist. But Kaz is no supercrip; he still has flaws.
He makes mistakes. He hurts people he cares about. He gets cocky and slips up. But perhaps the best part about Kaz is that he does not seek a cure. It is antithetical to his character. His disabilities affect him in myriad ways, and we see that on the page. But he never seeks a cure, magical or otherwise—and the subversion of that trope, the disabled protagonist who wants to be cured, is key, especially in speculative fiction, which often ignores disabled people, or assumes we would all have been cured (Ratcliff, 2018).

Jesper and Wylan also are more than their disabilities. Unlike Ahmad in *The Gauntlet*, who also has ADHD, Jesper is not simply a collection of symptoms. Jesper is good-natured and funny. He is a bit of a flirt and an ace gunslinger. He is the glue of the group, soothing feathers ruffled by Kaz’s brusqueness. He is a little unreliable. Jesper is always in motion—a common trait for boys and men with ADHD. But still Bardugo does not make light of his disabilities; his restlessness and impulsivity lead him to gamble large sums of money he does not have—which is how he ended up with the Dregs. Even though he is already in over his head, he does not stop:

“You look exhausted. Will you sleep at all tonight?”

Jesper just winked. “Not while the cards are hot. Stay and play a bit. Kaz will stake you.”

“Really, Jesper?” she’d said, pulling up her hood. “If I want to watch men dig holes to fall into, I’ll find myself a cemetery.”

“C’mon, Inej,” he’d called after her as she passed through the big double doors onto the street. “You’re good luck!”

_Saints_, she’d thought, _if he still believes that, he really must be desperate_ (p. 62). Sometimes, Jesper does not think things through, but he resents it when Kaz calls him on it, like when he sets Wylan to chaperone him after Kaz gives him money to buy supplies for their heist or when Kaz keeps him out of the loop because his debts give the other gangs leverage. But his skill with his pistols—skill that requires practice and
concentration and stillness—is what keeps him in the Dregs. That, and his loyalty. Jesper is necessary to the heist, and the others recognize that. For his part, Wylan is not a member of the Dregs—he is the son of the merchant who sets up the heist—but he becomes essential to their plan. He has more formal education than the rest of the crew, and he is able to use that to their advantage several times: by fooling some guards by singing in their language and by becoming their demolitions expert. Wylan is good at math and music because they do not get mixed up the way letters do; it seems likely that Wylan has dyslexia, or something like it. His father mocks him because of this, but this is immediately countered by Jesper:

“What my son cannot do, Mister Brekker, is read. He cannot write. I have hired the best tutors from every corner of the world. I’ve tried specialists, tonics, beatings, hypnotism. But he refused to be taught. I finally had to accept that Ghezen saw fit to curse me with a moron for a child.” …

“You’re the fool,” Jesper snarled. “He’s smarter than most of us put together, and he deserves a better father than you” (p. 447-448).

Wylan and Jesper are essential to helping the Dregs escape; without them, Kaz, Inej, Nina, and Mattias would have been trapped in the prison. Wylan and Jesper also buck the stereotype of disabled people being nonsexual; they are attracted to each other, and Jesper mentions being attracted to other genders, as well.

Even an author who writes as good of disabled representation as Bardugo uses ableist language: moron, dumb and dummy and dumbest, stupid, madness, idiot, crazier and crazy, blind and blinded, fools, cripple, insane, demented, and deluded. However, cripple, at least sometimes, is used by Kaz in the way many disabled people do: reclaiming a slur that has been used against them—something that was intentional (Bardugo et al., 2018).
Discussion

The following section will discuss three broad areas relating to this paper. First, I will evaluate the quality of the disabled character representation across and among all 10 books. Second, I will discuss what this means for librarians and young readers alike. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of this study and potential avenues for future research.

The quality of disabled character representation

The 10 books selected cross a variety of genres—fantasy, contemporary fiction, sports fiction, historical fiction, adventure, romance, magical realism, and science fiction—by authors across a variety of intersections (including ability, gender, sexuality, and race), and nearly all of them include problematic or stereotypical depictions of disabled people. Indeed, few of them even pass the Fries test (Fries, 2017), which asks three questions about the disabled character or characters: “Does a work have more than one disabled character? Do the disabled characters have their own narrative purpose other than the education and profit of a nondisabled character? Is the character’s disability not eradicated either by curing or killing?” (para. 9). This, like the Bechdel-Wallace test it was modelled after, is an incredibly low bar, and yet only three books hurdled it: Girls Like Us, The Gentleman’s Guide to Vice and Virtue, and Six of Crows. One of those books—Girls Like Us—has incredibly stereotypical depictions of disability.
If we return to Dunn’s (2015) questions about disability representation in young adult literature, patterns begin to emerge. As a reminder, those questions are:

- How is disability represented in the text?
- Who benefits and who loses as a result of that representation?
- What purpose does the disabled character serve?
- Are harmful stereotypes, narratives, and tropes about disability cultivated or disrupted? How?

The first question—how is disability represented in the text—is answered extensively in the findings section, but the short answer is that it is largely represented poorly. In the 10 books selected, stereotypes abounded with little, if any, disruption. This is problematic, given that nondisabled people are more likely to learn about disability from media than from disabled people (Hall, 2015). If most or even many people’s frame of reference for disability comes from stereotypical depictions, that has a real and negative impact on their beliefs and attitudes toward real disabled people.

The third question—what purpose does the disabled character serve—is also answered more extensively in the findings section, but the short answer is similarly grim: The characters generally exist in relation to other nondisabled characters, either as a catalyst for action or to show readers something about them. Nondisabled characters’ treatment of Auggie in Wonder, for example, serves as shorthand for whether they are good people. Readers know right away that Julian is a bully because he is cruel to Auggie; similarly, we know Summer is good because she is kind to him. In Carve the Mark, Cyra’s disability lessens and changes because of Akos’ compassion. In both The
*Girl Who Could Silence the Wind* and *The Gauntlet*, something terrible happening to a
disabled character—murder and getting trapped in an alternate dimension, respectively—
spur the nondisabled protagonists into action. Only in *Six of Crows* and *The Gentleman’s
Guide to Vice and Virtue* do disabled characters exist in their own right, to have their own
adventures on their own terms.

In many of the books studied, the point of the representation is to engage
nondisabled readers. While several of the authors make that explicit in author interviews
included with the texts, the way disability is portrayed speaks for itself. When disabled
people are portrayed as inspiration for nondisabled people, as are Auggie and Adonis; as
a catalyst for nondisabled protagonists’ actions, as are Luis and Ahmad; as less than
human, like Luis and Cyra; as deserving of their suffering, like Cyra, Biddy, Quincy, and
Ahmad; as not really disabled at all, like Auggie, Maddy, Autumn, and Victor; as
anything less than a full person with flaws and passions and a range of emotions then
everyone—disabled and nondisabled alike—loses. Nondisabled readers get a one-
dimensional, monolithic view of disabled people that reinforces society’s view of
disabled as less than (Griffith, 2018; Stratman, 2016; Mitchell, 2008), while disabled
people can have a negative self-image reinforced, with tremendously negative
consequences for their self-concept (Darragh, 2016).

Ableist stereotypes are largely unchecked in the books selected for study, with
two exceptions: *Six of Crows* and *The Gentleman’s Guide to Vice and Virtue*. Bardugo
and Lee, respectively, push back on common tropes; Kaz, Jesper, Wylan, Monty, and
Percy all have agency. They are all fully fleshed out characters whose disabilities are so
much a part of them that the reader cannot “filter [them] absently out of their
imaginations” (Mitchell, 2008, p.186). Their disabilities affect their lives in meaningful ways, and they get to feel a variety of emotions about their lives and their disabilities. They also do not seek out or want cures. By contrast, all of the other disabled characters—and the ways the nondisabled characters and other elements interact with them—cultivate stereotypically ableist depictions of disability. Adonis in Pinned and Cyra in Carve the Mark are supercrips. Maddy in Everything Everything and Luis in The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind (and, arguable, Autumn and Adonis in Pinned and Quincy and Biddy in Girls Like Us) show readers that disabled people do not get happy endings. Nearly every disabled character (save Maddy in Everything Everything—though she is not actually disabled) is the victim of violence; this trope in particular can be extremely dangerous, as it normalizes violence against disabled people. Ahmad in The Gauntlet, Auggie in Wonder, Cyra in Carve the Mark, Luis in The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind, and, to some extent, Adonis in Pinned, Victor in Paperboy, and Biddy and Quincy in Girls Like Us are their disabilities. In Ahmad’s case, we learn nothing else about him other than he has ADHD. Reducing disabled characters to their disabilities and violence against disabled people were the most pervasive stereotypes in the books examined in this study.

**What does it all mean?**

Though this study is not necessarily representative of all middle grade and young adult books with disabled characters, we can draw some conclusions about what we, as educators and readers, can do. Many nondisabled people will learn more about disabled people from media than from actual disabled people, making the quality of representation incredibly important: “Literary writing has the potential to reach large and diverse
populations; it serves a pedagogic function in the sense that it not only documents but also shapes attitudes toward disability” (Hall, 2016, p. 4). As a result, librarians and other educators need to ensure that authentic representations of disability make it into our classrooms and collections. We need to advocate for more and better books for children and young adults: better mirrors, better windows, better sliding-glass doors. Disabled people have been advocating this for a long time, and it is time that nondisabled people do so, as well, in the same way we advocate for high quality queer representation, Black representation, Muslim representation, and more. We cannot do this haphazardly. Instead, we should apply a critical eye; in addition to asking the questions posited by Dunn (2015), there are others we could ask: Who is included? Who is excluded? Who is named? Who does the naming? What are the consequences of language choices? (Lewiecki-Wilson & Brueggemann, 2008, p. 2). When we use books with disabled characters in instruction or curricula, we should interrogate our own biases about disability and disabled people, how that might shape the perceptions and actions of teachers and students, and what information about disability do we not know that could help dismantle ableist attitudes and barriers (Lewiecki-Wilson & Brueggemann, 2008, p. 5).

Who is represented in literature, how well, and by whom is, at its heart, a discussion of power. What we read “affects us—drenches us, to use [Adrienne] Rich’s language, and that to avoid drowning in this drench of assumptions we must learn to re-read” (Fetterley, 1978, p. viii). Our society is drenched in ableist assumption, and that comes out in the literature we write about disabled people. Literature is political; those who have not had to wrestle with this fact have likely seen themselves represented in
media over and over. Literature is not universal, despite some academics, educators, and librarians putting forth the idea that good books are: Hipple (1992) asserts, “Literature written for young adults is fine literature, about themes that are universal, with quality that is stunning. Such literature merits, and rewards, attention” (p. 14, emphasis added).

In practice, this has meant that the white, cis, heterosexual, nondisabled experience has been applied more broadly as universal. However, when universality is applied to media written by marginalized people, it often means the work was written to be palatable to or easily understood by the majority group. A similar argument can be made of those who suggest that books are art and should be judged as such and not based on fomenting attitudinal and cultural shifts. While some may argue that literature should stand based on literary merit alone and not be saddled with such extraneous issues as representation, Bishop (1982) notes the impossibility and futility of such a stance:

Purists suggest that literature is its own excuse for being, and that to judge children's books on criteria other than literary ones is to debase literature and to burden its creators with a responsibility not really theirs. Purists notwithstanding, educators who choose books for children cannot separate literary evaluations from social responsibility. The literature we choose helps to socialize our children and to transmit to them our values (p. vii).

Dunn (2015) asserts that many literary texts also include strong social messages, including Shakespeare; indeed, “no text can escape its implications” (p. 8)—and that includes books with and about disabled characters. Arguments that these issues do not matter ignore the power dynamics at play. While Fetterley was discussing the sexist nature of the literary canon, her words apply to the ableism pervasive in society and, yes, in literature:

One of the main things that keeps the design of our literature unavailable to the consciousness of the woman reader, and hence impalpable, is the very posture of the apolitical, the pretense that literature speaks universal truths through forms
from which all the merely personal, the purely subjective, has been burned away or at least transformed through the medium of art into the representative. When only one reality is encouraged, legitimized, and transmitted and when that limited vision endlessly insists on its comprehensiveness, then we have the conditions necessary for that confusion of consciousness in which impalpability flourishes (p. xi).

She notes that American literature is male, but it is also many other things: white, cisgender, heterosexual, and nondisabled. Several of the books included in this study play into the dominant narrative that being nondisabled is desirable and normal, and being disabled, therefore, should be avoided at all costs—and certainly not something to be proud of or take as part of a person’s identity. All the stereotypes about disabled people considered in this study—except disability as normality—support the current power dynamics in place around disability and disabled people that place disabled people below nondisabled ones.

**Limitations and moving forward**

There are several limitations to this study and a multiple of avenues for future research. Several of the books included problematic depictions of intersections other than disability that were beyond the scope of this paper, including *Girls Like Us*, race and weight; *Paperboy*, race; and *Carve the Mark*, race and gender. Examining the intersectionality of books with disabled characters—including those that have won awards for the quality of their representation in other ways—would make an interesting and needed avenue for future research. Examining the authenticity of the representation in books for young children could be another avenue for future research, as could expanding the current study beyond 10 books.

The process of selecting books for this study also highlighted another area of research: how metadata is assigned to books. Many of the books I found for potential
inclusion in this study were not tagged as a book with disabled character in either TitleWave or NoveList. How books with disabled characters are categorized and whether there are any patterns to the books that get a “disabled character” tag versus those that do not would be an interesting study.
Conclusion

Disability is a social construct. But ableism has very real and systemic effects. Moreover, what has been considered disability has varied by time and culture (Rose, 2017). What is constructed, what is made, can be unmade—but not without effort.

There are a variety of disabled tropes used in media, and books aimed at tweens and teens are no exception. All of the books reflected ableist norms in some ways, whether through their extensive use of ableist stereotypes or their use of ableist slurs and language. This matters because so few people talk about disability representation, especially when compared with other types of representation. As a start, the tropes named in this study can serve as a beginning for librarians and others who care about disability representation to critically examine the literature they read and recommend for ableism—whether the disabled character is a protagonist, as in Wonder, or a minor side character, as in The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind. At the very least, librarians and others can begin to examine their and others’ use of ableist slurs—crazy and lame being the two I hear most often—and interrogate what that says about mentally ill people and disabled people with limps and mobility issues.

This study—small as it was—reveals the ubiquity of stereotypical disability representation and the need for more people pushing for better representation. Indeed, every author used ableist slurs or metaphors to some extent. That may seem small, but language impacts reality. The words we use to describe things affect how we see those
things in real life:

The oppression of bodies directly links with the way perceptions of bodies create identities, and these identities shape lived realities. Thus, if a woman is perceived to be passive, child-like, asexual, and "special needs," then society treats her as such. Representation not only structures, but also creates, realities; it is both informed by and responsible for the creation of the kinds of binaries that systems of oppression require” (Carlson, 2016, p. 141).

By noticing the ableism around us and calling it out, we can take the conversation about disability representation in children’s literature—which has been stalled in the same place since at least the 1970s—to the next level.
References

Anderson, L. (n.d.). Lily Anderson on Twitter: “Today, a student brought me a book with a derogatory term for a gay person in it. The book uses it to highlight how mean the side characters are. But my student only saw the word, only felt the hatred. She put the book down and cried.” Retrieved February 24, 2018, from https://twitter.com/ms_lilyanderson/status/966752048124370944?s=12


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Napolitano, M. (2016). So tough, so brave, the consummate survivor: War, Trauma and Disability in the Harry Potter Series. In J. Stratman (Ed.), Lessons in Disability:


Spoonie, C. (2018, February 10). Eh... I use one. It’s an accessibility device. It makes things accessible. The stigma is trash, but I am happy to be able to access things again. My wheelchair gives me freedom & mobility. Very ungrim. Don’t be afraid. Diseases are trash, but it’s not the fault of wheelchairs! [Tweet]. Retrieved
March 25, 2018, from
https://twitter.com/coffeespoonie/status/962499209277722624


Wilson, C. E. (2012). Only Time Will Tell: A Content Analysis of Juvenile and Young Adult Literature on Characters with Disabilities and Whether Character Portrayals Have Improved Over Time (Master’s). University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
Appendix A: Books Used in This Study


Appendix B: Books Considered for This Study

The following table includes a by no means exhaustive list of middle grade and young adult books with disabled characters published in English between 2012 and 2018, regardless of the quality of the representation.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Ables</td>
<td>Jeremy Scott</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Blindness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afterward</td>
<td>Jennifer Mathieu</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>PTSD, trauma, autism</td>
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<tr>
<td>All in Pieces</td>
<td>Suzanne Young</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Developmental disabilities (brother)</td>
</tr>
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<td>A Blind Guide to Normal</td>
<td>Beth Vrabel</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Blindness</td>
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<td>A Blind Guide to Stinkville</td>
<td>Beth Vrabel</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Blindness, albinism</td>
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<td>A Blind Spot for Boys</td>
<td>Justina Chen</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Blindness (dad)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Born With</td>
<td>Lorna Schultz Nicholson</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Down syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braced</td>
<td>Alyson Gerber</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Scoliosis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cammie Takes Flight</td>
<td>Laura Best</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Blind</td>
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<td>Charlie &amp; Frog</td>
<td>Karen Kane</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Deaf</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dear Isaac Newton:</td>
<td>Rachel Hurza</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Scoliosis</td>
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<td>A Dog Called Homeless</td>
<td>Sarah Lean</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Blind/deaf (friend)</td>
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<td>Down the Rabbit Hole:</td>
<td>Susan Campbell Bartoletti</td>
<td>2013</td>
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<td>The Diary of Pringle Rose</td>
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<td>Drowning</td>
<td>Nichola Reilly</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>One hand</td>
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<td>The Elementals</td>
<td>Saundra Mitchell</td>
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<td>Polio</td>
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<td>Faceless</td>
<td>Alyssa B. Sheinmel</td>
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<td>Fighting for Don'tae</td>
<td>Mike Castan</td>
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<td>Forget Me Not</td>
<td>Ellie Terry</td>
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<td>Formerly Shark Girl</td>
<td>Kelly L. Brigham</td>
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<td>Fragile Bones</td>
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<td>Handbook for Dragon Slayers</td>
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<td>How to Speak Dolphin</td>
<td>Ginny Rorby</td>
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<td>Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus</td>
<td>Dusti Bowling</td>
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<td>Just Under the Clouds</td>
<td>Melissa Sarno</td>
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<td>King of the Mound</td>
<td>Wes Tooke</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>Left Out</td>
<td>Tim Green</td>
<td>2017</td>
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<td>The Legend of Mickey Tussler</td>
<td>Frank Natti</td>
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<td>Love Blind</td>
<td>Christa Desir</td>
<td>2016</td>
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<td>Macy McMillan and the Rainbow Goddess</td>
<td>Shari Green</td>
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<td>The Monster on the Road Is Me</td>
<td>JP Romney</td>
<td>2016</td>
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<td>Munro versus the Coyote</td>
<td>Darren Groth</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>Night Sky</td>
<td>Suzanne Brockmann</td>
<td>2014</td>
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<td>Not If I See You First</td>
<td>Eric Lindstrom</td>
<td>2016</td>
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<td>A Quiet Kind of Thunder</td>
<td>Sara Barnard</td>
<td>2018</td>
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<td>Rain Reign</td>
<td>Ann M. Martin</td>
<td>2014</td>
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<td>Otherbound</td>
<td>Corinne Duyvis</td>
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<td>Vince Vawter</td>
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<td>39</td>
<td>Pinned</td>
<td>Sharon G. Flake</td>
<td>2012</td>
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<td>Push Girl</td>
<td>Chelsie Hill</td>
<td>2014</td>
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<td>41</td>
<td>Rain Reign</td>
<td>Ann M. Martin</td>
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<td>Red Butterfly</td>
<td>A.L. Sonnichsen</td>
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<td>Red Zone Rivals</td>
<td>Eric Howling</td>
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<td>Same But Different: Teen Life on the Autism Express</td>
<td>Holly Robinson Peete, Ryan Elizabeth Peete</td>
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<td>Say What You Will</td>
<td>Cammie McGovern</td>
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<td>She Is Not Invisible</td>
<td>Marcus Sedgwick</td>
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<td>Silence</td>
<td>Deborah A. Lytton</td>
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<td>Deaf/Hard of hearing (HoH), stutter</td>
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<td>The Six</td>
<td>Mark Alpert</td>
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<td>Slider</td>
<td>Pete Hautman</td>
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<td>The Someday Birds</td>
<td>Sally J Pla</td>
<td>2018</td>
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<td>Stepping Out</td>
<td>Laura Langston</td>
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<td>Club foot</td>
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<td>Summer on the Short Bus</td>
<td>Bethany Crandell</td>
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<td>Abled protagonist, disabled campers</td>
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<td>Super Max and the Mystery of Thornwood's Revenge</td>
<td>Susan Vaught</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Wheelchair user</td>
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<td>Taken</td>
<td>David Massey</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Abled protag, various disabled secondary characters (diabetes, prosthetics, amputees, etc.)</td>
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<td>A Taxonomy of Love</td>
<td>Rachael Allen</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Tourette syndrome</td>
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<td>The Theory of Hummingbirds</td>
<td>Michelle Kadarusman</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Talipes equinovarus (club foot)</td>
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<td>Things I Should Have Known</td>
<td>Claire Scorell LaZebrik</td>
<td>2017</td>
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<td>A Time To Dance</td>
<td>Padma Venkatraman</td>
<td>2015</td>
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<td>The War That Saved My Life</td>
<td>Kimberly Brubaker Bradley</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Club foot</td>
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<td>You're Welcome Universe</td>
<td>Whitney Gardner</td>
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<td>Odd and True</td>
<td>Cat Winters</td>
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<td>The Humming Room</td>
<td>Ellen Potter</td>
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<td>Invalid</td>
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<td>I'll Meet You There</td>
<td>Heather Demetrios</td>
<td>2015</td>
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<td>Kate Klimo</td>
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<td>Missing limb (dog)</td>
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<td>Year</td>
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<td>Maxine Kumin</td>
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<td>Mark Oshiro</td>
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<td>Francesca Zappia</td>
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<td>Hannah Moskowitz and Kat Helgeson</td>
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<td>Zac Brewer</td>
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<td>Cameron and the Girls</td>
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<td>Marisha Peshl</td>
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<td>Before I Let Go</td>
<td>Marieke Nijkamp</td>
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<td>Tess Sharpe</td>
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<td>Tell Me No Lies</td>
<td>Adele Griffin</td>
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<td>The Disturbed Girl's Dictionary</td>
<td>NoNieqa Ramos</td>
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Appendix C: Ableist Language Used in the Books in This Study

A list of the ableist language used in all 10 books. Note that not all of the words on this list are inherently offensive; their inclusion depended on context.

- Lame
- Stupid, stupidity, stupidest
- Crazy, crazier
- Dumb, dumbest, dumbstruck, dummy
- Idiot
- ADD
- Slow
- Mentally ill
- Disabled
- Illiterate
- Retard, retarded
- Speddie (special education)
- Differently abled
- Mentally challenged
- Fool, fools, foolish
- Loony
- Turn a deaf ear
- Deaf
- Madness, mad, madmen
- Mute
• Lunatic
• Cripple, crippled
• Imbecile, imbeciles
• Insane, insanity
• Blind, blindly, blinds
• Mania, manic
• Delusion, deluded
• Panic attack
• Freak
• Moron
• Addiction
• Unstable
• Obsession
• Crackpot
• Demented
• Handicapped