



Disability in Modern Children's Fiction

Article Author:

[Pat Thomson](#) [1]

[75](#) [2]

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Other Articles

Byline:

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Disabled readers have every right to see themselves represented in books. It is sobering to think that 20 years ago there were twice as many male characters as female in children's books and working mothers were all but unknown. That battle is being won and the efforts to give black characters their rightful place in literature is being vigorously pursued. What progress has there been for disabled people?

Although there is a wider choice today than was available to Lois Keith as a child, there are still problems. The greatest gap seems to be for the youngest children. There are few good picture story books though there is non-fiction, often illustrated with photographs. Some are very good but they do not offer a literary experience. For the older reader, the number of books has increased, they are more realistic and they recognise different forms of disability. However, we are unlikely to be fully satisfied with these books until disabled writers start to come through in greater numbers.

There is still a tendency for a book with a disabled character in it to be a `problem' book and there is an infuriating genre which might be termed a `second fiddle' book. In these, there is indeed a disabled character but they exist only to promote the personal development of the main, able-bodied character. Thus Samantha becomes a better person through having known someone in a wheelchair. Bully for Samantha but what about the person in the wheelchair? In rejecting this type of book, however, one can still accept books which have the education of the able-bodied as their main purpose. Through the work of authors who are themselves disabled or of others whose imaginative work closes this gap, readers can be made aware and sensitised to the world of the disabled, and through that, there is at least a chance of the two worlds becoming closer.

The following selection is of titles which, first of all, work as books. The disabled are not served well by being put into `formula' books. They are all novels in the age-range 9-16 years and are arranged roughly in chronological order of age, starting with the youngest books. None offers `miracle cures', none associates disability with evil, and all present the disabled characters as differing personalities, individuals in their own right. It is a start.

The Bus People, Rachel Anderson, Oxford, 0 19 271602 6, £6.95; Red Fox, 0 09 987420 2, £2.99 pbk

Each morning in his mini-bus Bertram picks up his passengers. He wouldn't swap them for the world - which is just as well as other drivers are less keen on this particular run, with `the specials'. There then follows six separate stories, woven together. All the children have a disability which affects them and those around them in different ways. We experience their day with them, enter a little into their feelings.

This is not a novel like the other books listed here, but an attempt by the author, whose own son has a disability, to make

us understand something of this other world. The accounts are realistic and the different problems brought by different physical and mental disabilities are described in some detail. Not only do we gain an insight into their lives but we learn what these children have to offer.

The Summer of the Swans, Betsy Byars, Puffin, 0 14 031420 2, £2.99 pbk

Byars writes with insight and understanding on all sorts of occasions and she can handle this theme, too. Sara, Wanda and Charlie have lived with their aunt since the death of their mother. At first Charlie seems very young, then we realise he is ten but has learning difficulties, and this year Sara is beginning to find him a bit of a burden. He is utterly entranced, however, when the swans land on the local lake and the memory of this draws him out of the house in the middle of the night. In the morning, Charlie is missing and Sara's own trivial preoccupations melt away in the face of her fears for her brother.

Byars is perceptive about human relationships and she draws a picture of the effect Charlie has on the other members of the family. We see Sara's dilemma when she defends her brother against outsiders but feels irritation with him herself.

This community is ultimately a kindly one, which may not always be so in real life but we understand Byars' purpose when she depicts a loving, family relationship which holds strong despite misfortune and stress and, within that context, both the disabled character and those who love him can come through.

Taking Off, Joseph McNair, Macmillan, 0 333 53144 2, £4.99 pbk; Piper, 0 330 32275 3, £3.50 pbk

Although disablement is central to the story, it can begin to look like some kind of stage prop and that the book is actually about how the disabled person affects the development of the central, able-bodied character. But, in this story, that is the whole point of the book.

Lisa has a young brother with brain damage caused during pregnancy. At the opening of the story that she has almost sole charge of him, playing fantasy games which please him and bring him close to her. Her parents, previously paralysed by guilt, have realised that their abdication of responsibility has been good for neither Lisa and little Cody nor their marriage, and they are resolutely picking up the pieces. As Cody progresses at his new school and Lisa's mother takes back the care of her son, Lisa suddenly feels she has nothing. It is at this point she meets Robert, a boy who is even deeper into fantasy than herself, and together they keep the real world at bay. The school scenes are often very funny but chart the characters' alienation.

The climax comes when Lisa sees Robert in a confrontation which shows that it is not enough to pretend. In a panic, she almost kidnaps Cody from his school and tries to get back to where they were, only to find that it is Cody who has made the progress, tiny but positive, and she has regressed. By the end of the book, Lisa has understood that the best way to show her love for Cody is to help him towards whatever independence he can achieve.

The story is not sombre. School and family tensions are there, but the whole is shot through with wit in the American 'wise-cracking' tradition which makes it a good read - easy but thoughtful.

Deenie, Judy Blume, Heinemann, 0 434 92883 6, £8.99; Piper, 0 330 28003 1, £2.99 pbk

Deenie is physically gorgeous and appalled by anyone less so, until she develops a curvature of the spine. Here we have the story of an all-American girl who is put in the position, for the first time, of the outsider. It is also typical of Blume's uncomfortable honesty that she should raise the problem of the non-supportive mother who was already mapping out Deenie's career as a model.

This is not just the story of a girl who has her hopes of 'becoming a cheerleader' or of her 'promising relationship with Buddy Braden' crushed, though that sort of Junior High interest is certainly part of the book, as is Deenie's developing sexuality. It is also about remaining oneself, holding on to your individuality and self-esteem whatever the world throws at you and Deenie comes through, pulling her mother behind her.

Annerton Pit, Peter Dickinson, Gollancz, 0 575 02239 6, £8.95

Jake and Martin get worried when Granpa stops writing. When they go to look for him, they find themselves at the centre of a violent attempt by revolutionaries to put pressure on the authorities. Jake is the character the reader identifies with most strongly and Jake is blind. We experience the story as he does and, inevitably for a sighted reader, there is an extra dimension. Jake is used to relying on all his senses and this alertness to clues which pass the rest of us by enhances the writing to a remarkable degree. Jake's first trump card is the way blindness is ordinarily perceived by the sighted. His enemies assume he is helpless and he is not. The second is that the darkness of the pit cannot disable him. But the book is not about Jake's blindness. It is a novel with an interesting moral dimension which has nothing to do with that. The revolutionaries are 'green'. Are they therefore justified? And what Jake meets in the pit is inside all of us.

Edith Herself, Ellen Howard, Harper Collins, 0 00 184254 4, £5.95; **Lions**, 0 00 673766 8, £2.50 pbk

Set in rural American in the 1880s, this short but full novel tells the story of Edith, a child subject to epileptic seizures before appropriate medication was available. On the death of her mother, she is sent to live with her elder sister who already has a son, Vernon. Her sister welcomes her but Edith is less sure about Vernon and his father. Brother John is stem and upright, a religious fundamentalist who is also the local schoolmaster. Until now, Edith has been kept from school because of her condition. In fact, John proves an unexpected ally. He sees that Edith is intelligent and can cope with the seizures and he insists that she should be treated normally. We also learn that when she is taunted, as her sister feared, he was watchful but allowed her to 'face them down', as he puts it, giving her full credit for her courage. And it is at school that Edith finds a friend, starts to read and gets on better with Vernon, and we leave her hopeful for the future.

The book is a warm, family story in the American rural tradition but it also merits thoughtful consideration. Brother John, who ought to be the villain, because of his distaste for sentimentality is ultimately instrumental in liberating Edith.

Warrior Scarlet, Rosemary Sutcliff, Puffin, 0 14 030895 4, £3.99 pbk

The Sussex Downs. The Bronze Age. Drem hears his grandfather speaking about him, doubting that he will ever 'win his way into the Men's side, with a spear arm he cannot use', but he is encouraged by a powerful hunter, Talore One-Hand, who understands. Drem has to fight for his place in the tribe at a time when being disabled was not only frustrating but perilous and at the Wolf slaying, the rite of passage which will make him a man, he fails and is exiled. And then his time comes again. Defending the old shepherd, he slays the great grey leader of the wolf pack and, takes his place in the tribe again.

Sutcliff's usual skill is exercised in giving us a detailed picture of this distant time, full of texture. At its heart is the story of a young man whose disability makes him different, who has to endure more than one kind of isolation, and the writing is surely informed by the author's own, personal understanding of his situation. It comes as no surprise when, finally, he takes Blai, the girl who did not truly belong, as his partner, 'like to like'.

The Stone Menagerie, Anne Fine, Methuen, 0 416 88640 X, £8.95; **Mammoth**, 0 7497 0343 1, £2.99 pbk

Ally goes to visit Aunt Chloe every week, though he hardly knows why. She seems locked inside her own head. Then, in the hospital grounds, he meets Flora and Riley who are different. Flora sees no reason to treat Aunt Chloe as others do and Riley's lateral approach to language and life leaves room for those who do not conform to what others have decided is normal. In the atmosphere they create, Chloe begins to pick up the tiny threads by which she can hold on to reality and her new state calls into question the rules by which not only she, but Ally too, have been expected to live.

It is Fine's special skill to be able to write about serious topics with a light hand. The book is often funny and the play of words enjoyably subtle. The contrasting settings, the hospital and the 'camp' in the old stone menagerie are striking and, of course, the menagerie is a metaphor. For young readers, Ally's gradual independence from the rigid care of his mother is a familiar link with their own experience and Fine invites them to extend what they feel to what Aunt Chloe, and those like her, experience.

Red Sky in the Morning, Elizabeth Laird, Heinemann, 0 434 94714 8, £7.95; Piper, 0 330 30890 4, £3.50 pbk

This was a runner-up for the Children's Book Award. The story of Anna's baby brother, Ben, who was only to live for two years, was painful for the children to read and many said they cried, but it won their hearts and their respect.

'Severe mental and physical retardation' the hospital letter said, and Anna is torn between her love for Ben at home and her reluctance to tell her friends about him at school. One by one, she tackles the hurdles, finding courage and growing herself. When it comes, Laird does not avoid the issues which surround the death. They are frankly dealt with. Perhaps the Award readers responded to the openness, not so often found in children's books. Finally, we see Anna with a new holiday job, using all she learned from her brother on another child who needs her, and herself 'a hundred times older... a thousand times wiser'.

Izzy, Willy-Nilly, Cynthia Voigt, HarperCollins, 0 00 184423 7, £6.95; Tracks, 0 00 673377 8, £2.50 pbk

Izzy had everything until the night she drove home from the party with Marco and became the victim of his drunkenness. Her leg is too crushed to save and from that moment, Izzy lives in a changed world. She sees her friends differently as she watches their reaction, all the closeness gone. Then into Izzy's misery clumps Rosamunde, blunt, practical and from the wrong side of the tracks. Only Rosamunde breaches the loneliness and fear of the hospital by being herself and, when Izzy returns to school, it is Rosamunde's staunch friendship which helps her.

Voigt uses the familiar ground of high school life in her own way, and the book is one of the few where the disabled person tells the story. We see every development through her eyes. Her family are sensible and sane but she feels under pressure when they seem to be pretending that everything is normal. 'I had been adjusted... but I didn't do anything. Everything had been done to me.' This is a slightly different view from that offered by the other books. Where it is the same is in its message that the disablement is not the sum total of the disabled person. They are a person first and disabled second.

See You Thursday, Jean Ure, Plus, 0 14 032516 6, £3.50 pbk

Ill at ease with herself at home and at school, 16-year-old Marianne feels a lodger will be the last straw. When Abe Shonfield arrives, he is young and really quite attractive but blind, and Marianne does not know how to react. What follows is a delicate juggling act, not only two young people learning how to approach each other, but also an active, independent blind person and an inexperienced but open-minded sighted person trying to work out what is best for each other. And what is best is that they finally treat each other as human beings and individuals.

One way in which books come to life in the classroom is that they open up topics for discussion safely at one remove. This seems to be an especially suitable text for this purpose. There is a great deal of practical information as well as an exposure of Marianne's uncertainties and Abe's sensitivities. It would inform both sighted and blind people and may provide an opportunity to air points otherwise left unspoken. The story is, of course, deliciously romantic. (Where were all these humorous, sensitive young men when I needed them?) It is far from soggy, however, and includes other themes of interest to teenagers. Perhaps its most attractive aspect for this list is that the two main characters, one blind, the other sighted, have equal importance. One speculates on what opportunities might be available for blind and sighted teenagers to discuss this one together.

Pat Thomson is a lecturer in children's literature, the education librarian at a College of Higher Education and an Honorary Vice-President of the Federation of Children's Book Groups. She is also a writer, well-known for her 'Share-a-Story' series from Gollancz. Her most recent titles are **Messages** in the 'Jets' series (A & C Black, 0 7136 3555 X, £4.99), **Beware of the Aunts**, a picture book published by Macmillan (0 333 52524 8, £6.99) and the seventh in a series of anthologies for Doubleday, **A Satchel Full of School Stories**, (0 385 40288 0, £8.99).

There are, of course, many more children's books dealing with a wider range of disability than we have been able to cover here. One source of information and advice is:

The National Library for the Handicapped Child, Reach Resource Centre, Ash Court, Rose Street, Wokingham, Berkshire RG11 1XS (tel: 0734 891101).

Founded in 1985, the purpose of the NLHC is 'to offer a resource centre for those working with children whose disability, illness or handicap affects their reading, language and communication'. It houses an extensive collection of books, toys and audiovisual materials for children of all ages. Special needs are grouped into six broad categories covering hearing impairment, visual impairment, language delay or difficulty, physical disability, emotional disturbance and intellectual handicap.

Phone or write for their excellent information pack which can be tailored to the specific needs of the enquirer, or you can visit them; opening hours are Monday to Friday, 10.00am to 5.00pm, though you are advised to phone first before visiting.

Two recent publications:

A Handbook on Death and Bereavement: helping children to understand (comp. Beverley Mathias and Desmond Spiers, available from NLHC, £2.95 plus p&p) is an annotated booklist of over 100 titles coded for use with children from pre-school through to secondary. Very useful for those helping children of all ages come to terms with dying and death.

Books for and about children with special needs (compiled by the same team but available free of charge from Tim Briggs, Barnicoats, Parhengue, Penryn, Cornwall TR10 9EN; tel: 0326 372628) is an annotated list of over 300 titles ranging across emotional, learning, physical and sensory disabilities. It's coded for use with preschool children through to adult and contains picture books, fiction and information books. A listing of this size is still regrettably scarce and it's free for the asking.

Page Number:

24

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