

Disability and the Novel

RACHEL ADAMS

It is a fundamental paradox of modernity that disabled bodies provide a rich source of aesthetic inspiration while simultaneously being shunned, reviled, and disqualified from participation in the social world. Visual artists have long used disabled forms to challenge the traditional equation of beauty and wholeness with aesthetic value, while authors rely on disability as a potent signifier of deviance and disruption. But rarely has the symbolic appreciation of the disabled body been connected to a concern with the status of actual people with disabilities. However, since the mid-twentieth century, the representation of disabled forms is increasingly tied to an awareness of, and desire to challenge or reconfigure, what we know about the lived realities of disability. So too, the field of disability studies has prompted critics to move from seeing images of disability exclusively in metaphoric terms to recognizing their resonance with the social, physical, and political experiences of people with disabilities and with conceptions of health and ability. This is to say that critical disability studies has evolved from a concern with the thematics of disability to a set of reading methods that situate bodies in relation to environment, language, and aesthetics. A survey of disability and the post-1940 US novel must thus go beyond a catalogue of disabled characters to consider the ways that disability invites experimentation with literary forms, as well as calling into question deeply entrenched assumptions about normalcy, ability, and personhood that have long structured the novel as a genre.

There is no shortage of disabled figures in US literature, although they have not always been recognized as such. This was not always the case. Sari Altschuler has observed how rarely bodies with physical or mental impairments appear in the early US novel. Beginning in the nineteenth century, changing understandings of the genre, as well as the status of the disabled body, led to a growing number of representations (245–274; see also Altschuler and Silva 2017). Among the most well-known disabled characters in US literary fiction are Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Roger Chillingworth, Herman Melville’s Captain Ahab, Rebecca Harding Davis’s Deb, the narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Dalton Trumbo’s Joe Bonham, Daniel Keyes’s Charlie Gordon, William Faulkner’s Benjy Compson, and Toni Morrison’s Sula. Of this abundance, David Mitchell

and Sharon Snyder have argued that disability serves “as the master trope of human disqualification” (2000, 3). In their influential study *Narrative Prosthesis*, Snyder and Mitchell propose that literature reinforces able-bodied norms by using the deviant body as an easily recognizable signifier for otherness, marginality, and corruption. Often the restoration of order is secured through the eradication or curing of the problem body, however in some cases it leaves a troubling remainder that cannot be easily expelled or normalized.

In literature of the United States, disabled bodies are an especially potent signifier because they call into question cherished myths of national belonging (see Russell 2012; Garland-Thompson 2017). Liberal democracy is founded on the social contract, which presumes a citizen who is rational, autonomous, and capable of engaging in reciprocal relations with his peers. People with disabilities raise questions about this liberal definition of personhood. Their dependence exposes the myth of the autonomous individual, revealing that, in fact, we are all to varying degrees dependent on others. Those with mental illness or cognitive or intellectual disabilities may be incapable of engaging in the forms of reasoned, independent, and mutual deliberation required of the ideal citizen. Like race and gender, disability confounds the democratic notion that—at least in theory—one citizen’s body is symbolically interchangeable with another. The disabled body is an irrevocably marked body, with distinctive needs and capacities that call attention to the limits of a “one size fits all” definition of civic rights and responsibilities (see Bérubé 2010; Kittay 1999; and Nussbaum 2006).

Mark Twain satirized these dilemmas of embodiment and civic duty in writing about the conjoined twins Chang and Eng in his sketch “Personal Habits of the Siamese Twins,” published in *Packard’s Monthly* in August 1869. In his fictive scenario, the twins fought on opposite sides in the Civil War, leading to an unprecedented legal conundrum when each took the other prisoner. “The proofs of capture were so evenly balanced in favor of each,” Twain writes, “that a general army court had to be assembled to determine which one was properly the captor and which the captive. The jury was unable to agree for a long time; but the vexed question was finally decided by agreeing to consider them both prisoners, and then exchanging them” (297). In Twain’s vignette, the twins—who have conjoined bodies and separate minds—pose a profound challenge to the autonomous, self-reliant individual envisioned by the eyes of the law. It is only by ignoring their disability and treating them as discrete persons that the case can be happily resolved. At the same time, the consensus that they are “both prisoners” suggests a grimmer view of their condition as a form of permanent and unwelcome captivity. More recently, the conundrums the twins’ body poses to conceptions of subjectivity, interiority, and narrative form were taken up by Darin Straus in his 2001 novel, *Chang and Eng* (see also Wu 2012).

Although literature is never a simple mirror of the social world, literary representations have evolved in response to changing attitudes toward disability. Since the mid-twentieth century, the frequency, significance, and specificity of representations of disability and disabled bodies in the US novel has steadily increased. This development should be

contextualized in relation to a number of important events, the most significant of which was the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. Modeled along the lines of the Civil Rights Act (1964), the ADA declared it unlawful to discriminate against people with disabilities. The same year saw the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which entitled all children with disabilities to a “free, appropriate public education” and required, to the greatest extent possible, that they learn alongside their typically developing peers. These legislative victories were the result of a longer history of activism by people with disabilities and their supporters who, in the mid-twentieth century, began for the first time to see themselves as a minority group and to claim disability as an identity. They agitated to end the practice of institutionalization, calling for inclusion in the community and the right to dictate the circumstances of their own care. In the 1960s and 1970s, people with disabilities would follow the lead of women, LGBTQ people, and people of color in developing a sense of disability less as a personal misfortune than a social and political identity. Where once people with disabilities were isolated according to symptoms and diagnoses, claiming disability as an identity allowed them to recognize shared experiences and political goals (see Longmore 2003; Neilson 2012; and Shapiro 1993). So too, the consolidation of disabled identity gave rise to a rich body of cultural production by and about people with disabilities.

Another key chapter in the story of disability in the twentieth century is the rapid development of medical research, which offered new treatments to eradicate or ameliorate some forms of disability, while bringing others into being by saving or prolonging lives. During times of war, improvements in combat medicine produced large numbers of young, mostly male disabled veterans whose needs spurred progress in the evolution of rehabilitation and prosthetic technologies (see Serlin 2004). Developments in medical knowledge and treatment saved infants born prematurely or with congenital conditions that would sometimes cause lifelong disabilities. While recognizing that improved health care is essential to the survival and well-being of people with disabilities, advocates for disability rights decry the “medical model” that sees disability in terms of limitations or defects residing in the individual body. Instead, they propose a “social model” that understands disability as produced by barriers in the social and physical environment. The emphasis of the social model is not on a wheelchair user’s inability to walk, but on broken elevators, narrow doorways, and stairs that bar non-ambulatory bodies from access. It recognizes that a person with autism is disabled by an overly stimulating environment, and a blind person by one where visual cues predominate. Informed by the social model, disability studies sees literature as a rich resource for understanding the complex subjectivity of people with disabilities, as well as how certain environments conspire to stigmatize and disqualify unusual bodies and minds. More recently, it also seeks to move beyond the examination of individual characters to investigate broader social and aesthetic phenomena that inform shifting conceptions of health, ability, and personhood.

The novel is a particularly apt genre for portraying disability, especially once a recognizable disabled identity emerged in the latter third of the twentieth century. One reason is topical. The most casual survey of US novels written since 1940 reveals a striking number of deviants, outcasts, and characters with ailing, disabled, or otherwise marked bodies. This tendency can be traced back to the modernists' interest in disability as a device for unsettling conventional narrative forms and subjects (see, for example, Adams 2022, Davis 2002, 79–101; Lyon 2012; Sanchez 2015; Valente 2014). Since the early twentieth century, the novel has been less concerned with establishing or reinforcing norms than with exploring the narrative consequences of their absence. Disabled characters are intriguing to modern and postmodern authors precisely because their unusual bodies draw attention to the limits of socially accepted standards of behavior and appearance. A second reason is generic. By definition, the novel is concerned with the development of characters within a social context. Insofar as novels construct a social world within which their characters evolve, they are the ideal literary complement to the social model's concern with the disabled body in relation to the cultural and built environment. So, too, the novel's concern with the representation of interiority allows it to explore, via fiction, the subjectivities of characters who might remain voiceless or marginal in life. A third reason is a heightened self-reflexivity that is the legacy of modernism. As the twentieth century moves forward, novels become increasingly interested in their own conditions of narrative possibility. Michael Bérubé has observed that disabled narrators, particularly those with intellectual disabilities such as William Faulkner's Benjy Compson or Mark Haddon's Christopher Boone, throw that operation into relief, challenging readerly expectations about character, temporality, and narrative form (see Bérubé 2016).

Literature can serve as a powerful tool to question the narrative paradigms that continue to dominate popular understandings of disability. The most tenacious of these paradigms are the religious, the tragic, and the medical. Throughout much of human history, disability was explained in religious terms. Sometimes, it has been deemed a blessing or a gift, but more often it is believed to be a bad omen, a curse, or a sign of internal corruption. Religious doctrine has often figured disability as a trial or lesson in the virtues of humility and forbearance; it has also been seen as a punishment for wrongdoing or spiritual impurity. The fiction of Flannery O'Connor, herself disabled by lupus, exposes the way organized religion exploits disability to serve its own interests. Although O'Connor maintained her Catholic faith, in her novels *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*, people with disabilities are harmed by misguided or false piety. In *Wise Blood* (1952), the protagonist Hazel Motes, who propounds a doctrine of anti-religion, becomes obsessed with a preacher who feigns blindness to manipulate others. The obsession culminates with Motes blinding himself. But his disability does not bring redemption. Instead of converting others, Motes becomes an object of pity and exploitation, engaging in brutal asceticism that eventually leads to his death. False prophets also appear in *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), where the protagonist, Tarwater, is caught between the religious

zealotry of the recently deceased uncle who raised him, and his secular uncle, Rayber. Torn between these contradictions, Tarwater fixates on Rayber's intellectually disabled son, Bishop, who has never been baptized. At the story's end, Tarwater becomes both murderer and prophet when he drowns the boy while attempting to baptize him. The story is harshly critical of the dead uncle's religious fanaticism, as well as those who would deny personhood and religious rites to a disabled child.

A second paradigm is the tragic, where disability is figured as a devastating misfortune. This narrative is exemplified by Daniel Keyes's well-known 1966 novel *Flowers for Algernon*, which tells the story of Charly, an intellectually disabled man who undergoes experimental brain surgery that transforms him into a genius. Tragedy ensues when the effects of the surgery begin to wear off and Charly reverts to his original state, devastated by the knowledge of his former brilliance. Katherine Dunn's 1986 novel *Geek Love* challenges the tragic mode with its story of a family that welcomes extreme forms of bodily difference. Reversing all protocols for prenatal health, Lil and Al Binewski deliberately produce congenitally disabled offspring in order to breed their own troupe of carnival freaks. The narrator, Olympia McGurk, is a hunchback, albino dwarf, whose appearance is unusual enough to draw stares but pales in comparison with her siblings: conjoined twin sisters, a brother with flippers for limbs, and another with immense psychic powers. The McGurk family turns the carnival into an insulated society where hierarchies are reversed and freakishness is exalted. In this context, the charismatic and egomaniacal Aqua Boy, Arturo, founds a cult that requires able-bodied acolytes to earn the privilege of having their digits and limbs amputated. His megalomania comes to an end only when the entire carnival community goes up in flames. *Geek Love* suggests that problems of cruelty and injustice cannot be resolved by simply turning the world upside down and putting the marginalized on top. Despite its violent end, the novel resists the notion that disability itself is either a misfortune or a metaphor for internal corruption. Tragedy stems not from the characters' sensational bodies, but from greed and lust for power.

A third familiar paradigm is the medical, which understands disability in terms of bodily pathology that requires cure or elimination. In the utopia depicted by Marge Piercy's 1976 *Woman on the Edge of Time*, humanity is cured of illness and disability. As Alison Kafer has noted, Piercy is representative of a tendency in speculative fiction to imagine a future in which all bodies are uniformly healthy and abled (69–85). Jeffrey Eugenides's 2002 novel *Middlesex* provides a strong critique of the medical model as seen through the eyes of its narrator, who is an intersex person. Raised as a girl, Calliope Stephanides runs into trouble at puberty, when her body begins to develop masculine characteristics. She falls into the hands of a sexologist who recommends surgery to align her sex organs with her gender. Desperate to keep her sexual function, Calliope runs away and teaches herself to live as a man, defying the idea that her disability can be overcome either through medical intervention or sheer will. The story is narrated by the adult Cal, who lives as a heterosexual male, his ambiguous genitalia a testament to a tangled, multigenerational history.

Middlesex is not just a critique of the medical model, but an exploration of the way identity is shaped by disability. Although Cal presents as male, the indeterminacy of his genitalia, as well as the experience of being raised female, are also core elements of his identity. He rejects a more politicized transgender community in favor of a version of self that fuses his intersex body with his identity as the grandchild of immigrants who lived through a tumultuous moment in Greek and Greek American history. As it interweaves a US immigrant narrative with an intersex *Bildungsroman*, the novel reflects, at the level of form, the different prongs of its protagonist's identity. This hybrid structure led some reviewers to accuse *Middlesex* of incoherence, but it can also be seen as an appropriate and considered mode for expressing varied and at times incommensurate facets of its narrator's identity.

In a period of heightened awareness about identity, many novels explore how the self is shaped by physical disability. Where literary characters with disabilities have long played secondary roles as figures for deviance, misfortune, and corruption, by the mid-twentieth century they were more often granted a central narrative position. For example, Wallace Stegner's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angle of Repose* (1972) is narrated from the perspective of a historian in a wheelchair; Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is Lonely Hunter* (1940) revolves around the deaf character, John Singer, and Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) is narrated by Chief Bromden, a patient in a psychiatric hospital who is thought to be deaf and mute. A number of novels feature an exceptionally tall or short protagonist, including the little people of John Irving's *Hotel New Hampshire* (1981), *Son of the Circus* (1994), and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989); John Sayles's *The Pride of the Bimbos* (1975); Dunn's *Geek Love* (1989); Armistead Maupin's *Maybe the Moon* (1992); Ursula Hegi's *Stones from the River* (1994); and Simon Mawer's *Mendel's Dwarf* (1999); and the giants of Kristen den Hartog's *The Girl Giant* (2012) and Elizabeth McCracken's *The Giant's House* (1996). While dwarf and giant might initially seem like opposites, as narrators they represent a common interest in exploring how body size is the source of their characters' uncommon perspective on the world. An extremely large or small body may serve as an easy metaphor for difference, but quite a few of these novels move beyond cliché to explore what Tobin Siebers calls the "complex embodiment" of protagonists living in a world designed for bodies of a very different shape and size. A good example is *The Giant's House*, which tells the story of the unlikely love between the exceptionally tall James Carlson Sweatt and Peggy Cort, a lonely, somewhat misanthropic librarian eleven years his senior. Narrated by Peggy, the novel describes James's struggle to live an ordinary life in a world where he cannot avoid being a spectacle. Although James's condition causes him loneliness and physical pain, his story moves beyond the tragic paradigm through Peggy's account of her complicated and imperfect love, as well as how James continues to touch the world even after his death.

In *The Giant's House*, the reserved narrative persona of Peggy Cort leaves certain aspects of the giant James Sweatt inscrutable. By contrast, Ursula Hegi's *Stones from the River*—narrated in the first person—provides a very intimate portrait of the subjectivity and

experiences of its protagonist, a dwarf named Trudi Montag. The German village where Trudi lives is home to many people with disabilities of one kind or another—a man with a metal plate in his knee, a neighbor with a crooked finger, a boy who dresses as a girl, a boy born without arms, an enormously fat boy, and a girl who can't stop drooling. As a young person, Trudi tries to distance herself from these others, fearing that their difference makes her own disability all the more apparent. But as the townspeople turn on one another under pressure from the rising Nazi regime, Trudi comes to recognize their shared suffering and to identify deeply with those who are stigmatized because of differences of mind, body, or identity. Disqualified from being either a romantic partner or a parent, she compensates by collecting stories of the many lives that have intersected with her own and becoming the architect of the novel that results.

As Trudi's affinity with her Jewish neighbors suggests, disability rarely operates in isolation from other identities, and the atypical body has frequently served as a cipher for other forms of otherness, or what Mitchell and Snyder have influentially called "narrative prosthesis." Sometimes this conjunction can become the ground for solidarity and mutual understanding. In the work of Carson McCullers, for example, wounded, excessive, or incomplete bodies often function as symbolic projections for queer desire, while queers have a heightened recognition of the alienation that comes from living with a disabled body. The terms "freak" and "queer" occupy a privileged position in her novels, which depict conventional society as oppressive and narrow-minded, as well as the painful and often isolating experience of being an outcast. McCullers's fiction is almost always set in small southern towns where freak shows remained popular and where those who transgressed racial and gender norms often encountered discrimination and violence if they were found outside of the sideshow tent. In this environment, the deviant body causes anguish and self-loathing, but it also inspires her characters to imagine other worlds where queer configurations of sex, gender, and race might be tolerated and even welcomed (Adams 2001). A more recent example of the intersection of queer sexuality and disability is found in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015), in which the protagonist Jude is physically and emotionally damaged by an abusive past, and finds some modicum of repair in a relationship with his longtime friend, Willem. Regrettably, the untimely demise of both men upholds a paradigm in which queer, disabled characters inevitably come to a tragic end.

While shared oppression can sometimes be the ground for solidarity, women and other minority groups have often resisted association with disability and the inherent assumption of stigma it bears. "Disability has functioned historically to justify inequality for disabled people themselves, but it has also done so for women and minority groups," writes Douglas Baynton. "Not only has it been considered justifiable to treat disabled people unequally, but the *concept* of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them" (33). As Baynton notes, one justification for

slavery was the alleged intellectual deficiency of African Americans (37). In the early twentieth century, eugenicists raised alarms about the menace of the feeble-minded, a category that linked intellectual disability to poverty, non-white races, women, and people of color (see Stubblefield 2009). These associations persist into the present, where students of color are far more likely to be classified as disabled and segregated within inferior, special education classrooms than their white peers, and where people of color more often live and work under conditions that will cause them to become disabled, and their impairments to go untreated.

Images of fragmented, wounded, or damaged bodies in African American literature allude to a longer history of linking race to physical and intellectual deficiency. Before his decision to go underground, the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) yearns to be acknowledged as an individual, but he is disabled by his race, which allows him to be seen only as a type. Alluding to the practice of representing both people of color and the disabled as freaks, he writes, "I am invisible . . . like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass." Figures of visual impairment—the blind Reverend Homer A. Barbee, the glass eye of brother Jack (bouncing grotesquely into a cup of water at a key moment), a crowd called "a nation of one-eyed mice" (343)—suggest how racial thinking obscures the particularity of individual identity. In these examples disability is the vehicle for Ellison's racial metaphor, however other episodes, such as the encounter with mad veterans at the Golden Day and the shock therapy administered to Invisible Man at the factory hospital are tied to a critique of the social conditions that make people of color more likely to become disabled, as well as the unequal care and services they receive. So too, Toni Morrison has created such memorable figures as Sethe, whose back is scarred by a "chokecherry tree" left by the slaveholder's lash; Baby Suggs, who walks with a painful limp; the one-legged Eva Peace; Pilate Dead, who lacks a bellybutton; the criminally insane Winnie Ruth Judd; the blind Marie Therese Foucault; the voiceless, feral woman named Wild; and the advertisements in *A Mercy* (2008) that identify slaves by their pock-marked bodies. In Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), runaway slaves are encouraged to have themselves sterilized. When the protagonist, Cora, realizes that the hospital that promised to provide care is in fact engaged in a genocidal project, it is a chilling reminder of the way that black bodies have been ill-served by the institutions of healthcare and medical research.

African Americans are not the only minority group to contend with the stigma of disability. The bodies of many characters in the fiction of Junot Díaz are devalued by virtue of their race, class, gender, physical appearance, and intellectual ability. A recurring character in his short story cycle, *Drown* (1996), is Ysrael, a Dominican boy whose face is so disfigured that he covers it with a burlap sack. Given (as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has argued) that the face is fundamental for the recognition of personhood, Ysrael's disability poses questions about the boundaries and limits of the human. Like Ellison's protagonist,

he claims to possess the power of “INVISIBILITY” that allows him to survive taunts and physical assaults by neighborhood boys. In a climactic scene, his power is thwarted by the narrator and his brother, who knock Ysrael unconscious so that they can peer under his mask. They are attracted and repulsed by what they see. Tobin Siebers argues that this scene evokes the freak show in the way it exposes the mechanisms used to objectify human differences. However, he also observes that the boys’ hatred for Ysrael stems from fear that their own differences might be exposed and objectified (Siebers 131–132). Díaz probes these mechanisms further in his novel *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), where the protagonist’s excessive girth turns him into an “overweight freak” (15). In addition to being fat, Oscar is intelligent and studious, qualities that are the antithesis of working-class, Dominican American ideals of masculinity. “You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like?” the narrator asks. “Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary US ghetto. Mama mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest” (22). Unlike such recent fat-loathing novels as Jami Attenberg’s *The Middlesteins* (2004) and Lionel Shriver’s *Big Brother* (2013), Díaz recognizes that Oscar’s problems are caused by the social world and not by flaws in his behavior or physical body. Thus, where disability may sometimes be a figure for deviance from a white, able-bodied norm, Oscar’s body fails the criteria set by his own community. Other ethnic US writers who explore the entanglement of race and disability include Maxine Hong Kingston (*The Woman Warrior* [1976]), Arturo Islas (*The Rain God* [1984] and *Migrant Souls* [1991]), Akhil Sharma (*Family Life* [2014]), Alejandro Morales (*The Rag Doll Plagues* [1991]), Leslie Marmon Silko (*Ceremony* [1977] and *Almanac of the Dead* [1991]), Ruth Ozeki (*My Year of Meats* [1998]), and Gayl Jones (*Corregidora* [1975] and *Mosquito* [1999]).

Although Oscar’s intellectual abilities isolate him from his working-class Dominican peers, for the narrator, as well as the novel’s imagined readers, these qualities elevate him above his tormenters. In nearly all the novels discussed so far, disabled protagonists are redeemed by the possession of compassion, insight, and uncommon intellect. Despite being ostracized because of the appearance and function of their bodies, their minds work just fine and, in many cases, better than average. This means they are fully capable of understanding the conventions of narrative and telling their stories in a manner that evokes concern and understanding. But what about the character whose disability causes their mind to work in ways that make them less appealing, communicative, insightful, or aware? It is much easier to create readerly identification with a character who possesses culturally sanctioned emotional and intellectual capacities than one who is unable to feel or express themselves in expected ways. This conundrum may be one reason why protagonists with physical disabilities have been far more common in US literature of the past century than those with intellectual disabilities or mental illness, the most stigmatized of all disabilities.

In the early twentieth century, intellectual disability and mental illness took on new interest as modernists became concerned with the inner contours of subjectivity. The

altered states of hypnosis, mesmerism, and intoxication promised new sources of creativity and insight about how the mind worked. Intellectual disability and mental illness would seem to present fascinating opportunities to explore more enduring conditions of intellectual alterity. However, modernism also coincides with the rise of eugenics: often an interest in the creative possibilities of unusual subjective states went hand in hand with a belief that the feeble-minded and mentally ill should be eradicated or removed from public space. Thus, novels that feature sympathetic, well-developed characters with intellectual disabilities, like William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) or John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), are the exception rather than the rule.

In the post-Second World War era, novels began to take a more critical view of the prevailing attitudes toward mental illness. Ken Kesey's 1962 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is often cited as a landmark because it adopts the perspective of the inmates of a psychiatric hospital. Narrated by the Indigenous American Chief Bromden—diagnosed with schizophrenia and also believed to be deaf and mute—it tells the story of the charismatic rebel Randle McMurphy, who feigns madness to escape a prison work gang. McMurphy galvanizes his fellow patients by insisting that madness is a sane response to a soulless, bureaucratic society. Within the institution the tyranny of the social world is embodied by the domineering Nurse Ratched, who rules the ward with an iron fist. When McMurphy becomes too disruptive, the doctors permanently extinguish his rebellious energies by giving him a lobotomy. Unable to tolerate seeing McMurphy reduced to a lifeless shell, the Chief smothers him and then escapes the asylum. The novel's critique of a society's intolerance for mental diversity resonated with many readers. However, in figuring madness as a form of resistance to an overly administered society, it risks losing sight of the real suffering caused by mental illness (Donaldson 99–119). It also engages in a troubling misogyny in making the figure of negative authority female and implying that the mental patients are being emasculated by overly powerful and authoritative women.

The counterpart to Kesey's novel is Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical account of her own struggle with mental illness, *The Bell Jar* (1963). After being rejected from a writing class, Plath's protagonist, Esther Greenwood, descends into a suicidal depression. Although triggered by this immediate event, Esther's illness also stems from a broader recognition of the limited options available to a woman of her class and educational background. While the novel is deeply critical of the social forces that constrain women's opportunities, it also takes Esther's madness seriously. Narrating the story some years after the events it describes, Esther is haunted by memories of her friend Joan—who committed suicide—and her sense that recovery is tenuous.

By giving voice to narrators with depression and mental illness, authors like Kesey, Plath, and J. D. Salinger set the terms for fictional writing about mental health in the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Since the 1960s, some have taken a cue from Kesey, romanticizing mental illness as a form of rebellion against rigid and oppressive social norms. Others have sought to recognize madness as a disability that

can cause profound suffering, as well as generate insight about self and community. These include Joanne Greenberg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964), E. L. Doctorow's *Book of Daniel* (1971), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and Rivka Galchen's *Atmospheric Disturbances* (2008). Other notable literary treatments of mental illness and disability are Wally Lamb's *I Know This Much Is True* (1998), narrated by a twin who struggles to care for his schizophrenic brother while seeking to escape the shadow of his brother's illness; Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), which includes narration by the family patriarch, who is diagnosed with Parkinson's and sliding into dementia; and Bebe Moore Campbell's *72-Hour Hold* (2006), which broaches the taboos surrounding madness and gender among African Americans with its story of a mother seeking to help her daughter diagnosed with bipolar disorder. As these works attest, madness is a challenging narrative phenomenon because it involves a mind in flux. Where the conventional protagonist of *Bildungsroman* follows a path of social and emotional development, the psyche of the mad protagonist is fluid, its ebbs and flows causing dramatic changes in personality. The mad protagonist cannot be counted on to follow any predictable path of social or emotional progress. While it is easier to narrate mad characters from without, novels like *The Corrections*, *Atmospheric Disturbances*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) experiment with formal strategies to capture the first-person narrative of characters experiencing mental breakdown.

Intellectual disability—a permanent condition of mental difference that is either congenital or acquired in childhood—presents a different set of narrative challenges. Michael Bérubé has argued that because an intellectually disabled protagonist is unable to recognize the typical operations of storytelling, he or she provides an opportunity to reflect on conventional narrative devices for depicting character, setting, and temporality. Bérubé is especially interested in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, which includes a section narrated by the intellectually disabled character, Benjy Compson, who may be the most fully developed narrator with an intellectual disability in the history of US literature. (Historically the novel has tended to represent characters with intellectual disabilities as if their minds were impenetrable. Examples include Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Sue Miller's *Family Albums* [1999], and Kim Edwards's *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* [2005], a novel narrated from the perspective of every main character *except* the one who has Down syndrome.) Benjy has no peer in US literature published since 1940, despite a number of novels that feature protagonists with autism and/or intellectual disabilities, including Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Elizabeth Moon's *The Speed of Dark* (2002), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), and Susan Nussbaum's *Good Kings, Bad Kings* (2013). Increasingly novelists who choose to represent characters with intellectual disabilities have become interested in the subjectivities of those characters.

Characters with disabilities present intriguing narrative possibilities, but literary criticism informed by disability studies must go beyond analysis of such figures. Disability

presents formal challenges that push at the boundaries of generic convention. Building on the legacy of modernism, subsequent US novelists have taken disability as inspiration to depart from traditional structures, as well as content, of the novel form. Novels that feature characters with disabilities often also experiment with disabling the conventions of genre. The talking book-as-narrator in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) or the stream-of-consciousness sections in *Beloved* (1987); the increasingly surreal atmospherics of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952); the sprawling narrative and absence of a central protagonist in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991); the use of footnoting to fracture and comment upon the narrative proper in Junot Díaz's *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*; the many storytellers in Nussbaum's *Good Kings, Bad Kings* (2013): all call attention to our expectations about novelistic form. In each, a thematic concern with disability is tied to an interest in rupturing normative narrative structures and dismantling conventional ideas about character development.

A more dramatic example is Richard Powers's novel *Operation Wandering Soul* (1993), which relates a dizzying series of journeys across time and space, some mythic (the Pied Piper of Hamelin) and some historical (the evacuation of children during the bombing of London). These vectors radiate out from a core narrative of sorts, set in the dystopian space of the children's ward at Carver General Hospital in a futuristic Los Angeles called "Angel City." There, readers encounter the pediatric surgeon Richard Kraft, who specializes in "Kiddy Karpentry" (22), a physical therapist named Linda Espera, a prodigious Thai immigrant with bone cancer, a boy with no face, and another diagnosed with progeria, a disease that causes accelerated aging. Their stories surface in fragmented episodes that veer abruptly into other times and places just in time to frustrate readerly identification with any one plotline. Powers has explored illness and disability in novels such as *Gain* (1998), which tells parallel stories about the rise of a multinational corporation and a woman's death from cancer; *Echo Maker* (2006), about a man who acquires Capgras syndrome (a form of emotional amnesia) after an accident; and *The Overstory* (2018), which includes both physically disabled and neurodiverse characters. But *Operation Wandering Soul* is his most formally experimental work and the one most negatively received by reviewers, who found it brilliantly intellectual but lacking a humanizing narrative center. Instead of seeing this aspect of Powers's project as a limitation, it might also be described as an effort to disable the novel form, removing many of the affective hinges we associate with the genre and stirring in the reader the same complicated, ambivalent responses occasioned by the disabled body. Linda Espera reads to the children at Carver General because she believes that stories are "the oldest recorded remedy." As she describes the healing properties of literature: "Sound it out, exercise the phonetics, the rhyme, the muscular spasm, the shape of the storied curve—beginning, development, complication, end. It is the point of being, the thing bones were built for, broken by, the land all leaps aim at, the link, the hovering conclusion, her whole-body therapy, the reading cure. A tale at night. A country a day for a year" (79). Compelling as this theory of reading may be,

Powers denies such a therapeutic experience to his readers, giving fragments instead of unity, shifting the ground to impede identification. By withholding expected narrative features, he reminds us of the ways that the novel form aspires to wholeness, symmetry, and order.

David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) employs other strategies to disable novelistic form. Wallace's novel is even more sprawling and vast than Powers's, weighing in at over 1,000 pages, including 388 footnotes (an integral part of the text, some over ten pages long and including footnotes of their own). Emily Russell observes that the book's size, as well as the reading strategy required by the endnotes, make different demands on the reader's body than a typical novel. By confounding the physical and cognitive experience of consuming the narrative, *Infinite Jest* makes the reader more aware of how body and mind generally work together in the act of reading. The pleasures of absorption and identification are disrupted by a novel that is not only literally hard to handle, but resistant to the usual configurations of plot and character. Form reinforces content in that many of the characters in *Infinite Jest* are disabled: a band of Québécois wheelchair assassins, a "Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed"; the bent, "macrocephalic and homodontic" Mario Incandenza; a woman whose face was burned by acid; and drug addicts. A central plotline concerns the hyper-abled teen athletes at the Enfield Tennis Academy, whose excessive eating and exercising, and injured, ill, and asymmetrical bodies often blur the line dividing ability from disability. The novel begins with the intellectually prodigious Hal, who has been struck by aphasia. His struggles to express himself draw our attention to disorders of communication that haunt this excessively verbal, articulate, detailed narrative. Hal, along with other disabled characters, is a prototype for a novel that pushes and pulls at the boundaries of literary form. Frustrating generic convention, *Infinite Jest* offers multiple plotlines, suggesting their interrelation without ever fully bringing them together.

Another approach to disabling literary form is found in Gretchen Henderson's "hybrid novel," *Galerie de Difformité* (2011). Henderson's *Galerie* is a "choose-your-own-adventure" book that invites the reader to select among different plots and outcomes under the guidance of Bea, a modern-day, disabled version of Dante's Beatrice. Instead of starting with page one and reading in a linear progression, readers may follow a series of recommended routes to trace out clustered themes and story lines. While this device is not unique to *Galerie*, what distinguishes Henderson's novel is that, in keeping with the book's title, each cluster is loosely related to questions about embodiment, form, and collecting or curating. These include a series of alphabetically labeled "exhibits" that contemplate the history of representing bodies and bodily difference, as well as reflections on the meaning of deformity, including an invitation to the reader to deform the book in a variety of ways, such as cutting or adding to the pages, or using them for some other purpose (wallpaper, paper dolls). In addition to reshaping the material book, the reader is also enjoined to contribute to its virtual life, either by sending examples for the author to add to her curated website

(set up with audio files to make it accessible to visitors with visual impairments), or via Quick Response codes that allow readers to enter the gallery directly using an iPhone or Android device. In this way, Henderson's project not only meditates on the meaning and history of deformity, but on the creation and experience of a disabled form, and how technology can bypass or produce forms of disability. With its ever-expanding, collaborative structure, *Galerie* is a model of interdependence, an alternative to the more closed, individually authored format of the conventional novel.

Recent scholarship has applied the approaches of disability studies to literary texts that have no evident connection to atypical bodies or minds, showing how disability studies introduces new reading methods, as well as social and political commitments. "I am determined to cure disability studies of its habit of diagnosing fictional characters," writes Michael Bérubé near the beginning of his study of reading and intellectual disability, *The Secret Life of Stories* (20). The analyses that follow extend beyond diagnosis or evaluation to explore how disability has inspired innovations in narrative form and content. Julia Miele Rodas (2018) finds autistic language in canonical literature by Daniel Defoe, Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, and others. Rebecca Sanchez's 2016 study *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and Visual Poetics in American Literature* uses the insights of American Sign Language to analyze the relationship between embodiment and literary experimentation in modernist texts that are "neither by nor about individuals who are deaf" (3). While Sanchez focuses predominantly on the earlier half of the twentieth century, her methods might be productively applied to the post-1945 novel. Take, for example, apocalyptic novels like Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* series (1987–1989), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), or Edan Lepucki's *California* (2014), which depict the utter breakdown of the natural, built, and social environment. Informed by disability studies, we might ask how such fictions invite a reconsideration of normative expectations about health, ability, behavior, and intellect in environments stripped of the familiar accouterments of daily life.

To what extent does the modern paradox with which I began—in which disabled bodies are simultaneously sources of aesthetic inspiration and social stigma—endure in novels written since the 1940s? And what is the relationship between literary and social and/or political representation in this era? There is certainly a feedback loop between the growing visibility and inclusion of people with disabilities and their appearance in both novels and literary criticism. But I have also suggested that there is no easy correspondence between fictive and political representation, and that disability studies is impoverished when it assumes or seeks out such an alignment. If we count on the novel to be our primary agent of social-political work, we will surely be disappointed. However, if we see the novel as a rich source for imagining as-yet unrealized alternatives to selfhood, community, and ability, and for showing how disability can invite compelling new modes of writing, reading, and understanding, then the alignment of the novel with disability truly is cause for optimism.

Works Cited

- Adams, Rachel (1999). "A Mixture of Delicious and Freak: The Queer Fiction of Carson McCullers." *American Literature* 71.3: 551–583.
- Adams, Rachel (2022). "Modernism's Cares." *Oxford Handbook of Twentieth-Century American Literature*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Leslie Bow. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. 246–263.
- Adams, Rachel (2001). *Sideshow USA: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Altschuler, Sari (2014). "'Ain't One Limb Enough?': Historicizing Disability in the American Novel." *American Literature* 14.2: 245–274.
- Altschuler, Sari, and Cristobal Silva (2017). "Early American Disability Studies." Special issue of *Early American Literature* 52.1: 1–27.
- Baynton, Douglas C. (2001). "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," in Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (eds.), *The New Disability History*. New York: NYU Press, 33–57.
- Bérubé, Michael (2010). "Equality, Freedom, and/or Justice for All: A Response to Martha Nussbaum," in Eva Feder Kittay and Licia Carlson (eds.), *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 97–110.
- Bérubé, Michael (2016). *The Secret Life of Stories: From Don Quixote to Harry Potter*. New York: NYU Press.
- Davis, Lennard (2002). *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions*. New York: NYU Press.
- Donaldson, Elizabeth (2002). "The Corpus of the Madwoman: Toward a Feminist Disability Studies Theory of Embodiment and Mental Illness." *NWSA Journal* 14.3: 99–119.
- Garland-Thompson, Rosemarie (2017). *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Literature and Culture* (1997). Rev. ed. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie (2009). *Staring: How We Look*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kafer, Alison (2013). *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Kittay, Eva Feder (1999). *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*. New York: Routledge.
- Longmore, Paul (2003). *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Lyon, Janet (2012). "On the Asylum Road with Woolf and Mew." *Modernism/Modernity* 18.3: 551–574.
- Mitchell, David, and Sharon Snyder (2000). *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Neilson, Kim (2012). *A Disability History of the United States*. New York: Beacon.
- Nussbaum, Martha (2006). *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, and Species Membership*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Powers, Richard (1993). *Operation Wandering Soul*. New York: William Morrow.
- Rodas, Julia Miele (2018). *Autistic Disturbances: Theorizing Autism Poetics from the DSM to Robinson Crusoe*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Russell, Emily (2012). *Reading Embodied Citizenship: Disability, Narrative, and the Body Politic*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

- Sanchez, Rebecca (2015). *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and Visual Poetics in American Literature*. New York: NYU Press.
- Serlin, David (2004). *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shapiro, Joseph P. (1993). *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Penguin.
- Siebers, Tobin (2010). *Disability Aesthetics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Stubblefield, Anna (2009). "The Entanglement of Race and Cognitive Disability," in Eva Feder Kit-tay and Licia Carlson (eds.). *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 293–314.
- Twain, Mark (1992). "Personal Habits of the Conjoined Twins," in Louis J. Budd (ed.), *Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, & Essays*. New York: Library of America, 296–299.
- Valente, Joseph (2014). "The Accidental Autist: Neurosensory Disorder in *The Secret Agent*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 38.1: 20–37.
- Wu, Cynthia (2012). *Chang and Eng Reconnected: The Original Siamese Twins in American Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.