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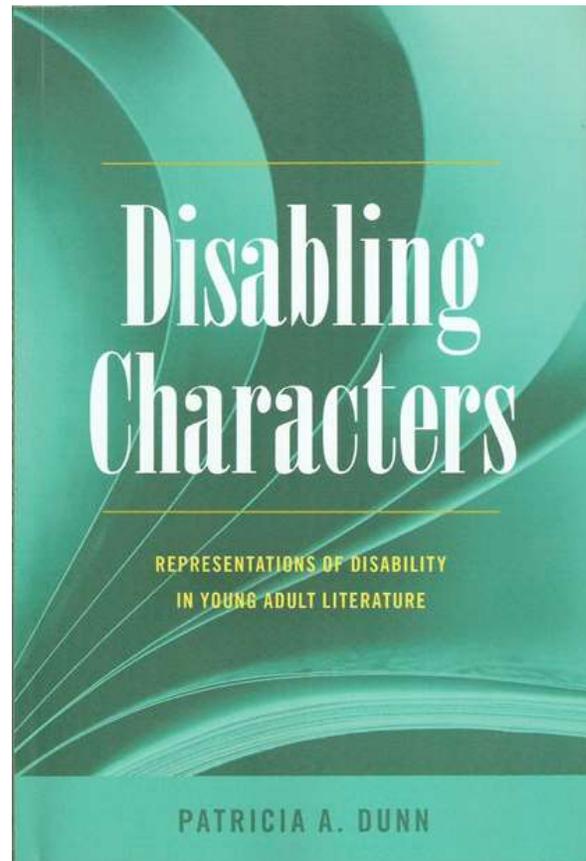
Dunn, P. A. (2015). *Disabling characters: Representations of disability in young adult literature*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Pp. 160

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With its publication coinciding with the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, *Disabling Characters* enhances the discussion of disability issues by providing a guide to critical analysis of characters with disabilities within young adult literature. The author, Patricia A. Dunn, pushes analysis of these characters beyond the standard approaches in literary analysis to include thoughts about the characters as they line up with critical approaches of disability studies. Dunn provides a foundation for this approach, and then provides several in-depth studies of young adult texts. In addition to looking at the texts themselves, Dunn continues her analysis to cover published reception documents, which include “summaries, reviews, discussion questions, reading guides, and quizzes” (p. 4) which are used by instructors to guide student work with the books. Dunn further states that her goal is to “make visible the underlying assumptions about disability present...in these texts and in materials about them” (p. 4).



Throughout the book, Dunn presents an approach to analyze characters with disability through the broad perspective of the disability studies discipline, and specifically the social model of disability. This theoretical model considers disability as a social construction where disability is seen as the various obstacles that are placed upon a person by society based upon their differences in terms of such things as mobility, communication, vision, etc. The social model employs the term impairment to describe the differences, and the term disability to describe the obstacle. For example, a weakness or paralysis of a person's legs would be an impairment that required them to use a wheelchair for mobility, but the disability would be the fact that a building with entrance stairs did not also have a ramp or a lift to allow a person using a wheelchair to enter the building. Dunn supports her approach by incorporating examples by disability studies scholars such as Paul Longmore, Simi Linton, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and others. Additionally, Dunn draws from the Society for Disability Studies (SDS), which is the scholarly organization for that discipline. Dunn's book is in line with the stated mission of SDS, which she states "seeks to augment understanding of disability in all cultures and historical periods, to promote greater awareness of the experiences of disabled people, and to advocate for social change" (p. 5).

Dunn suggests that the language that we use to discuss disability is significant. For instance, the phrase in the book title, "disabling characters," can indicate either a positive or negative aspect of disability analysis. In a positive light, the inclusion of the characters with disabilities can "challenge or 'disable' myths about disability and help draw attention to constructed barriers to real people with disabilities" (p. 2) through scrutinizing myths and stereotypes. Conversely, the inclusion of characters with disabilities "can make discrimination and

exclusion worse for real people with disabilities" (p. 2) by reinforcing stereotypes, including plots that result in death or a cure for the disabling condition, or incorporating unchallenged discriminatory remarks reflective of ablest thinking.

According to Dunn, "reading nuanced novels with disabled main characters, followed by responsible discussions, can get students thinking critically about disability" (p. 2). Since readers look at fictional characters through the lens of their own experience, even if the reader has a lived experience with disability, the likelihood of reading about a character that shares their exact experience is minimal. When attempting to analyze these characters whose lives are very different from their own, readers may need help to think about these characters from new perspectives. Thoughtful teachers may help students use these reading experiences to question their own preconceived ideas and stereotypes of disability.

In each of the chapters of the book, Dunn presents an approach to analysis and applies it to two or more fictional works. In making the book selections, Dunn discusses the value of using texts to explore the world and cultural life, and the importance of avoiding didactic texts and instead selecting those with good literary quality. All of the texts that she considers are appropriate for use with young adults. Some are regularly taught in secondary education literature classes, others are less well known, or at least less often included in classroom discussion. To support her analysis of the text, Dunn offers guides for questions and classroom activities as well as providing information about resources that would support the teacher's preparation of these texts.

Dunn offers critical analysis of each selection, along with practical ideas for incorporating the texts as part of classroom studies. She includes general questions for discussion of the texts such as:

- Do some stories about disability make societal conditions better or worse for those concerned with disability rights?
- What effects might different stories have on readers with a variety of life experiences?
- How might story endings affect readers' views of disability?
- To what extent do published reception documents (discussion questions, study guides, and quizzes) for those books challenge or perpetuate harmful stereotypes?
- How might analysis of disability-related YA novels and their reception documents break down constructed barriers to full participation? (p. 3)

Dunn intends for these and other questions throughout the book to be used and modified by teachers for use with various titles and to serve as a companion to “more conventional questions about vocabulary, plot, and symbols” (p. 3).

Chapter 1 provides a discussion of “agency, rebellion, and challenging the status quo” (p. 19) by comparing two titles: *Accidents of Nature* by Harriet McBryde Johnson and *The Acorn People* by Ron Jones. These two books are unified in their focus on the summer camp experience for characters with disabilities. Dunn points out that one of the books, *Accidents of Nature* is written by an author who identifies as living with a disability and the book is based in part on the author's own experiences as a child in summer camp. This fact likely influenced the critique of societal views of disability as they play out in the camp, where the campers rebel against the prevailing view of their lives as pitiable. *The Acorn People* also presents campers who wish to change the status quo of the camp, but instead of rebellious campers, the camp counselor leads a rebellion. In this way, Dunn presents a contrasting view of agency between the

campers with disabilities taking the lead on challenging the status quo versus the counselor led approach.

“Respect, Etiquette, and the Drama of Rude Behavior” is the topic for Chapter 2, as three books, *The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin* by Josh Berk, *Five Flavors of Dumb* by Antony John, and *The Cardturner* by Louis Sachar, are considered. The books provide examples of both positive and negative interactions between characters related to a character's disability, even going so far as offering a “dramatic ‘how to’ for readers who may not have had an opportunity to think about these issues” (p. 13). Each of these three books was selected for this chapter due to their explicit or implicit critiques of the way that non-disabled characters relate to characters who have various impairments.

In Chapter 3, Dunn defines awakening stories as those which seem “aimed at naïve or uneducated readers who do not know what other groups already know because of their lived experience” (p. 80). Similar to texts that deal with racial issues, the goal is frequently to gain an appreciation or understanding for a group that experiences life differently from the reader. Dunn selects two older titles for the analysis, a short story, “The Scarlet Ibis” by James Hurst and a frequently assigned novel, *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor. Due to their popularity as assigned texts for high school literature classes, Dunn is able to base her analysis on a bounty of reception documents as well as the texts themselves. In both cases, the primary conflicts revolve around primarily negative approaches to disability that are resolved by the character with the disability dying in one text and being miraculously cured in the other.

Chapter 4 provides an analysis of three books: *Peeling the Onion* by Wendy Orr, *Stoner and Spax* by Ron Koertge, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. Each of these books explores the theme of searching for one's identity, a common theme in young adult

novels. The search for identity is complicated in these novels by the role that disability plays in each character's understanding of their value and role in society. Dunn points out that two of the authors have disabilities that are similar to the protagonists that they created, which gives added authenticity to their characters and their experiences.

In Chapter 5, Dunn addresses "supercrip" stereotypes in her analysis of four books, *The London Eye Mystery* by Siobhan Dowd, *Marcelo in the Real World* by Francisco X. Stork, *From Charlie's Point of View* by Richard Scrimger, and *The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin* by Josh Berk, whose protagonists are able to solve the mysteries and become heroes in their stories not in spite of their disabilities, but because of them. According to Dunn, the danger in these narratives is that "a 'successful' disabled person can't just simply be, can't just live a normal, satisfactory life without being expected either to 'overcome' an impairment or to use it somehow to save the world" (p. 14).

Dunn states that her intended audience for this book is "English Language Arts teachers and students in middle and high schools" (p. 4). With her combination of critical analysis of the texts as well as the inclusion of the reception documents, teachers would be able to use this book as a practical guide for supporting and supplementing current curriculum. She offers many examples of questions and reception documents for the specific text analyzed in the book, but also provides a general approach for using the book as a guide for analyzing and discussing other titles. In addition, this book serves as a good complement to other contemporary titles such as *Teaching about Disabilities through Children's Literature* by Prater and Dyches (2008), which is geared for slightly younger children.

Dunn acknowledges that few books that represent disability are included in current curriculum, and she does suggest

looking to the Schneider Family Book Award for examples of high quality books with a representation of disability. While this is an excellent source for potential titles, the author could address other options for locating worthy titles for study such as *The Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award*, online review sources such as *Disability in Kidlit* (<http://disabilityinkidlit.com>), and online or print bibliographies that focus on representation of disability such as *Autism in Young Adult Novels* by Irwin, Goldsmith, and Applegate (2015).

In addition to providing thorough coverage of how the author encourages presenting and discussing these books, a note on Dunn's style is appropriate. Throughout the book, the author incorporates notes on her personal approach to discussing or teaching with the selected texts which comfortably came across as a collegial discussion that one might have during an extended coffee break in a teachers' lounge or at a professional conference. This style choice could help put a reader at ease if they harbor any apprehensions regarding incorporating representations of disability in their classroom teaching or book discussions. Dunn clarifies that she does not consider herself to have any sort of impairment, but instead identifies herself as an ally to those in the disability community, which also might encourage teachers to incorporate analysis of disability representations when they themselves do not have lived experience with a disability. Dunn's inclusion of both published and freely available online resources to accompany the books acknowledges the reality of contemporary teachers who should not feel limited to one approach when planning learning experiences.

All in all, Dunn's book is a welcome addition to the resources available for teachers that would like to strengthen their inclusion of disability representations in their curriculum. The readable style of the book along with the combination of critical analysis

and practical suggestions for classroom interactions make this a potentially valuable tool for addressing representations of

disability in literature as well as a jumping off point for discussions in other curricular areas.

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