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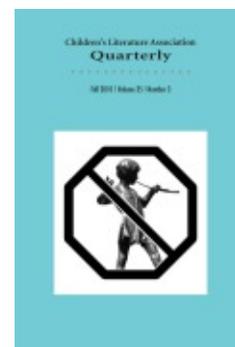
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Handicapped Characters in Children's Literature: Yesterday and Today

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George Shannon tells stories, and has published some of the ones he makes up.

Handicapped Characters in Children's Literature: Yesterday and Today

by Greta D. Little

Whenever we approach a topic from the perspective of time, development and change are likely to be the focus of our investigations. The topic of handicapped characters in children's literature is no exception. Even a quick look at the titles of stories about these characters reveals how much change has occurred. *The Blind Child* (1791), *The Deaf and Dumb Boy* (1837), *Elfred; or, The Blind Boy and his Pictures* (1856), *Faith, the Cripple* (1864), and *Blind Alice* (1868) are characteristic of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century books; today *The Seeing Stick* (1977), *The Balancing Girl* (1981), *Button in her Ear* (1976), and *Don't Feel Sorry for Paul* (1974) are typical. These changes are not accidental. Our society's heightened awareness and sensitivity to the rights and feelings of handicapped or disabled persons has created an atmosphere where such labels are no longer acceptable. Furthermore, in 1975 the U.S. Congress passed The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which ensures suitable education opportunities for children with special needs and prohibits detrimental labeling of them. Today the emphasis is on eliminating the stereotypes and stigmas attached to disabled people, and focusing on their achievements as well as their frustrations.

At the end of the eighteenth century we were only just beginning to recognize the abilities of handicapped people. Reform movements had not yet made their impact on society. The possibility of educating the blind and deaf was not recognized until the middle of the eighteenth century. Neither lipreading nor sign language was taught until 1755, and schools for the deaf were not available in the United States until after 1815. The nineteenth century saw tremendous growth in educational opportunities for the handicapped. Teachers and pupils like Samuel Gridley Howe, Laura Bridgman, Anne Sullivan, and Helen Keller gained wide attention demonstrating what could be achieved in spite of multiple handicaps. Those who suffered physical disabilities were no longer considered less than human and shut away from society.

Do stories written for children reflect the change in these social attitudes? What do children's books of yesterday tell their readers about people who can't walk

or see or hear?

The handicapped characters of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century books were described as "delicate," "pale," "thin," "puny," "deformed," "frail." But their handicaps made them closer to God, and they were unfailingly cheerful, easily amused, eager, gentle and unselfish. For example, Mark of *Mark Barnett, the Cripple* (1864) is "like an angel of peace" (13), who never complains of weariness or langor. He is different from other boys. He has read a great deal and had the leisure to consider what he has read; thus his thoughts and words are more refined. He has a mine of wealth because of his communion with God. In spite of his weakness, Mark works hard making baskets, "never sighing for health" but "leaning on Christ's great love" (29). In *Blind Alice*, Alice is healthy, happy and good-humored before scarlet fever leaves her frightened, distressed, and complaining to her mother of the darkness. However, Alice goes to the Institute for the Blind and returns with a "happy face, eyes bright with tender and glad feelings" so that one "would never have believed they saw a blind girl" (101). "The Deaf Shoemaker" (1859) is a sickly, puny youth with "feeble step and emaciated frame" (72), but he has "patient perseverance," "studious habits and intellectual qualities" which "caused him to be treated with kindness and attention" (74).

In many of these stories the handicapped characters are protagonists only in the sense that they are at the center of the story going on around them. Their role is a passive one, to inspire or influence the real actors in the story's plot. Once again the titles are indicative: *Child-Angel* (1866) and *Ministering Children* (1867) are both collections of stories about children who help handicapped characters and profit from the experience. Mark Barnett's only contribution to action is to counsel his wayward brother and pray for him; otherwise he either provides an example of why more fortunate children should not complain or an opportunity for other children to show their Christian charity. In *Faith, the Cripple*, Faith too acts only in the sense of giving those

around her the chance to show how good they are.

There are exceptions, however. Biographical stories written in the nineteenth century tell of what Laura Bridgman, Helen Keller, and John Kitto ("The Deaf Shoemaker") were able to accomplish. They are active participants in their own stories. In *Elfred; or the Blind Boy and his Pictures*, readers learn what Elfred can do—how by asking specific questions he is able to point out aspects of the pictures that the seeing children have overlooked.

In these early works the reader's attention is drawn to the specialness of the handicapped characters, and their role in the story is always tied to their physical condition. They are not simply ordinary participants in a plot. They are central characters because their handicap is necessary to the storyline. Supporting characters who are disabled rarely have a role beyond demonstrating their handicap and providing a chance for the healthy hero or heroine to reveal his worth. Few of these characters have fully developed personalities.

In today's books, children with disabilities are treated differently. First of all, they are described in more positive terms. Paul, the victim of birth defects, in *Don't Feel Sorry for Paul*, is "remarkably strong for a boy his age" (23). He loves all physical activity, wrestles with his father, and wins a ribbon horseback riding. Lester, who suffers from cerebral palsy in *The Alfred Summer*, is "fine-boned and tall," even "aristocratic" (26) in spite of his uncontrolled jerking. In *I Have a Sister My Sister is Deaf* (1977), the deaf sister feels sounds and understands from lipreading and gestures. She cannot sing or know when the phone rings, but she can play the piano, dance, tumble, and climb. Most modern authors rely less on descriptive adjectives than their predecessors, opting instead for verbs to portray their handicapped characters. They tell readers what the characters can and cannot do rather than what they are or are not.

These characters are rarely passive. Even where the focus is on one of the other family members, as it is in *My Brother Steven is Retarded* (1977) or *I Have a Sister My Sister is Deaf*, readers learn about the handicapped character's life as well as how it affects the narrator. Both Steven and the deaf sister do more than inspire good deeds.

The role of these characters in the plot continues to be defined by their handicaps, as it was in the nineteenth century. Occasionally, however, a story is totally unrelated to the character's disability. Margaret in *The Balancing Girl* cannot walk and is confined to a wheelchair. Her story of setting up a chain of dominoes as part of a fund-raising carnival is in no way dependent on her inability to walk. The story gains poignancy from her triumph over a physical handicap, but that is entirely secondary. The main triumph for Margaret is in raising more money than her nemesis Tom, a fellow student who had challenged her balancing skills.

These changes in the portrayals of handicapped characters are consistent with the changes in our society and in our attitudes toward disabled persons. In the eighteenth century, handicapped people were a burden to their families, usually kept isolated from the rest of the world. They had little hope of being educated, and almost none of an independent, self-sufficient existence. Today,

the social consciousness which was only awakening in the nineteenth century has prompted the establishment of programs and institutions designed to help the handicapped become part of mainstream culture. The handicapped are still special and perhaps different, but today's society is more inclined to integrate than to isolate. Consequently the characters we find in children's books are pretty ordinary people with ordinary reactions and goals, except that they must cope with and compensate for something they are not able to do.

If society and its view of handicapped people have changed so much, have the messages carried in these books changed also? Early books seem to promote three major purposes: to inspire Christian piety and patience through examples of the sufferings of unfortunate handicapped characters, to show the accomplishments possible in spite of physical adversities, to educate the public about what is involved in various handicaps and overcoming them.

The first group have a strong religious overtone and are probably responsible for the stereotype of handicapped people, handicapped children in particular, as "too good to live." Thus Faith, who never thinks of herself, is rewarded by death: "Faith sings as she walks through the golden streets of her beautiful home; no more tears, no more pain, no more sin, no more a little, deformed cripple, but an angel now" (243). In "Poor Jay Jones" (1867), Jay is "carefully nursed and tended by pitying neighbors" who "sweetened the cup of suffering that poor, lone boy was compelled to drink" until he "passed down the stream of Death" (82-3). Not all these inspirational stories end in death. *Elfred* was written to "illustrate the spirit and temper of mind with which evil should be borne" and to show "the innumerable sources of enjoyment which still remain" (7).

The second group of stories are happier, concentrating on the successes of the disabled characters; nevertheless, religion continues to play an obvious part in the message communicated. In some, the introduction makes clear how the children are expected to profit from their reading. "The Deaf Shoemaker" tells how John Kitto overcame his deafness to become an important publisher and editor of *The Biblical Encyclopedia* and *The Pictorial Bible*. His story is part of a collection of short accounts of people and what happens to them, "written to lead children to Christ" (vi). Alice's ability to help support her mother and to read books, enjoy her garden, and do other things show children that blindness can be overcome.

Stories which are meant to educate the public usually are those about actual people. They are similar to the second group in that they are upbeat and concentrate on what their heroes and heroines have been able to achieve, but they are not especially religious in tone and provide factual information. "The Story of Laura Bridgman," which appeared in *St. Nicholas* (1889), includes a pictorial demonstration of the fingerspelling alphabet. "Helen Keller," also in *St. Nicholas* (1889), shows a sample of Braille writing. Both are explicit in explaining how the Perkins Institute for the Blind operated.

The instructive purpose for literature about disabilities is a very popular one today. Some books are non-fiction

with only a factual component, but many, like *Button in my Ear*, use a storyline to explain the problems caused by the handicap. The main purpose of *My Brother Steven is Retarded* is to enlighten children about the realities of living with the mentally retarded. *Don't Feel Sorry for Paul* includes very specific information about prosthetics—how they are made and the difference they can make in the lives of birth defect victims like Paul.

The accomplishments of the handicapped, especially how they are able to adapt to their disabilities is also a frequent theme in modern books. *ATU, The Silent One* (1967), tells of a mute African youth who draws pictures to tell of his exploits on a hunting expedition since he can't join in the storytelling around the fire. *Light a Single Candle* (1964) is the story of fourteen-year-old Cathy, who goes blind from glaucoma and is able to return to her public high school with a seeing-eye dog that allows her to interact with her fellow students as an ordinary student.

These contemporary examples of books showing what the handicapped are capable of doing do not have the strong religious overtones of the earlier works. As a result, we are inclined to say that they are not didactic, but realistic. However, John Rowe Townsend has pointed out that "didacticism is still very much alive. . . . Years ago we threw the old didacticism (dowdy morality) out of the window; it has come back in at the door wearing modern dress (smart values). . ." (56). He goes on to explain:

We see our ideal society as one in which everybody is thoughtful, gentle, compassionate, withal humorous and fun-loving; in which everyone is integrated but nevertheless individual. We expect, consciously or otherwise, that writers for children will provide us with instruments for bringing this society into being. (58)

In books about the handicapped this didactic purpose is especially alive. Nineteenth-century books to inspire focused on the sufferings of the handicapped; today's focus on their ability to adapt and achieve. The message is more often implicit rather than explicit, and rarely overtly religious. Nonetheless, the inspirational message can still be found in contemporary stories about the disabled. A comparison of two books—*Elfred; or, The Blind Boy and his Pictures* (1856) and *The Alfred Summer* (1980)—demonstrates the similarities and the changes.

Elfred is blinded when he is struck in the head with an arrow shot by an older playmate. Although his mother had thought Elfred would be destitute and helpless all his life, the boy's cheerful industry soon convinces her otherwise. He learns to "see" by feeling things. He makes a chicken coop, refusing all help because he can do it himself. One of his friends is a little girl, Josie, who brings him his first picture despite her parents' warning that it will make him feel his blindness and helplessness more. Instead, the pictures provide him even more contact with other children who enjoy hearing Elfred's stories about them.

Elfred's closest friend is Park, a deaf and dumb boy. They manage to communicate by gestures, frequently using Josie as interpreter. On an excursion with Josie they

meet Adonijah, who is lame. Park carries him to the cart, which Elfred pushes and Park pulls. "One was deaf and dumb, another was a cripple, and the third was blind. But then they had senses and faculties enough among them" (122-3) is the author, Jacob Abbott's comment. Elfred and Park, now close friends, prove their successful adaptive abilities by cooperating to build a Martin house which Park enjoys by watching the birds while Elfred listens to their singing. The story ends with a list of the lessons readers should have learned:

1. beware of dangerous toys. . .
2. happiness in life depends on temper and disposition. . .
3. do all you can to befriend and help the unfortunate; make them smile and forget their privations and sorrows. . . (157-60)

The main characters in *The Alfred Summer* are Lester, victim of cerebral palsy; Alfred, who is mentally retarded and suffers from epilepsy; and Myron, an inarticulate, clumsy teenager who is also overweight. When the boys first get together and go to the cafeteria for a snack, Lester describes them as "the Cripple Parade" (25), words reminiscent of Abbot's description of Elfred and his friends. Over their food Myron tells them about the boat he is building, and Lester and Alfred volunteer to help by collecting wood. They work in the basement of their apartment building each night, sharing their feelings of alienation and fear. The group's expedition to the park to check other boats for the placement of passenger seats is the first time Lester is able to go anywhere without his mother hovering close by. Later Lester and Alfred return to the park on their own to get oarlocks for Myron's boat. Lester draws up the plan and Alfred actually executes it. The plan is successful; but as they are returning on the train, Alfred suffers an epileptic seizure when they reach their stop. No one on the train is willing to help, and Lester must pull Alfred off the train in spite of his lack of coordination. As a result, Lester is able to earn the respect of his father for the first time.

In honor of Alfred, Myron changes the boat's name from *The Getaway* to *The Alfred*. When the boat sinks on its first voyage, Myron learns to laugh at himself. All the characters are triumphant in spite of their various problems. Lester describes the scene this way:

I listened to that big crowd appreciating my friend when just a moment before they were hurting him. I saw Myron's big grin and knew his heart had gone down with his boat. I saw the Burts [Alfred's parents] cheering as if they hadn't a care in the world. And I didn't forget me, either, unable to even do a decent job of yelling for my friend and yet bursting with. . . I don't know what.

Really, sometimes life just knocks me out! (119)

In both stories the handicapped characters draw on each other's strengths to compensate for their shortcomings. They succeed by pooling abilities and cooperating. They have to convince their concerned parents that they are capable of having any independent life. The triumphs these characters achieve are modest, but in each case the children strive for and are able to

attain a degree of normalcy. Both books inspire children by showing how people can cope with insurmountable problems and still enjoy life.

Although there are similarities between the books, there are striking differences also. Most of these differences are indicative of the way children's literature itself has changed. For one thing, Lester, Alfred, and Myron have much more developed personalities than Elfred, Park, and Adonijah. Their story has a well-constructed plot, whereas *Elfred* is a series of events. Furthermore, *The Alfred Summer* employs a self-conscious first person narrator, a technique not much used in nineteenth-century children's literature. Consequently, readers are able to enter Lester's mind and feel his hurt and frustration more acutely than they can feel Elfred's. This self-conscious perspective is particularly useful for writers whose characters are handicapped, since it provides an effective tool for convincing readers themselves.

Both the society and the literary conventions which shape children's literature have changed considerably. As a consequence, the books seem quite different. The type of society promoted in today's books is not that promoted in the nineteenth century. Empathy with the handicapped is sought over sympathy for them. Overt religious moralism has been replaced by a subtler implicit didacticism urging compassion and acceptance. The stories have richer plots with multidimensional characters who can express their own feelings. Yet for all these differences, at heart these books have remained very much alike. Whether written yesterday or today, stories with handicapped characters have the same theme or purpose: They tell us about disabled people and their lives, what they are able to achieve, and finally inspire us by the example of their efforts.

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