



The Lure of the Normal: Researching Depictions of Disability in Select Young Adult Graphic Narratives

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Abstract

The present paper intends to focus on the way disability is presented in graphic narratives read by young adults. It is an analysis and interrogation of the portrayals of disability in select graphic narratives like Marc Hempel's, Mike Carey's and Sonny Liew's Re-gifters (2007), Mike Carey's, Jim Fern's and Eric Nguyen's Crossing Midnight (Vol. 1) (2007), Cecil C. Castellucci's and Jim Rugg's The Plain Janes (2007), Keith Giffen's and John Rogers' Blue Beetle: Shell-Shocked (2007), Sara Varon's Robot Dreams (2007), Gary Whitta's and Ted Naifeh's Death, Jr. (2007) and Bob Kane's and Sam Keith's Batman: Secrets (2007). The study thereby effectively adds a grip and disability perspective to the field of Graphic Novels. The objectives of the research paper are framed with a view to find answers to and get clear cut notions regarding core issues like the nature, range and type of disabilities most often featured, whether one disability received more attention than others, detection of a systemic pattern, if any, that is followed in the treatment of disabilities; also looks at deviations from the hitherto followed pre-set, pre-determined models and conventions in the treatment of disability, whether the characters are defined by their disability, whether stereotypes are used in graphic novels to portray people with disabilities and finally whether the depictions of disability are problematic, faulty, misleading and misleading. This study also inevitably draws on the age-old specificity, oppressive power and contemporaneity of the concept of normalcy. It endeavours to deconstruct the very idea of normalcy. This sort of dissection denaturalizes all the hegemonic notions of normativity thus reframing ableism as a problem that concerns everyone. The current text also recommends the arena of an emerging discipline called Graphic Novels to be an integral part of curricula for nouveau reading exercises and exciting learning experiences.

Keywords: Disability, Graphic narratives, Oppressive power, Ableism.

“We live in a world of norms. Each of us endeavours to be normal or else deliberately tries to avoid that state. We consider what the average person does, thinks, earns or consumes...There is probably no area of contemporary life in which some idea of a norm, mean, or average has not been calculated...To understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body. So much of writing about disability has focused on the disabled person as the object of study... I would like to focus not so much on the



construction of disability as on the construction of normalcy. I do this because the “problem” is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the “problem” of the disabled person.” (Lennard J. Davis’ *The Disability Studies Reader*)

Literature very often motivates, inspires and enlightens us to scale great heights in life by exposing us to new realms of thoughts and ideas. It makes use of language in a malleable and impressionable way to fulfill the agenda of the text. All communication is not linguistic. *Pratyaksha* (‘that which is before one’s eyes’) or direct perception, in Indian philosophy, is one among the most valuable sources of knowledge. Perception is definite knowledge that arises from sense-object contact. ‘I know it when I see it,’ best exemplifies and substantiates this unit of knowledge called perception. The power of the visual can be found in the form of comics and graphic novels.

The graphic novel is one of the most exciting forms of storytelling, one of the most preferred formats for literature. It is a relatively new type of literature that emerged during the late 20th century. It quickly gained popularity among the readers. Its closest predecessor is the comic book, which also came into its own during the 20th century, and these media are still closely intertwined, so much so that the distinction between the two often becomes blurred. The graphic novel strikes us by its duality (text plus visuals); the pictorial presentation of stories is its striking aspect. Its combination of art and text offers endless possibilities for creative expression.

Owing to its unique combination of visual art and verbal text, the graphic novel often controls a reader’s expectations of a story in innovative ways. Elements such as panel size, page layout, art style, colour, physical format, et Cetera can be made use of to help shape the reader’s interaction with the story and emphasize certain concepts or themes. The graphic novel is a form that values experimentation with narrative structure and stylistic elements that shape the way audience reads the text.

One popular reading format for youth today is the graphic novel. Approximately, fifteen percent of the global population lives with some form of a disability. As young adults constitute an even larger population of individuals with disabilities and because of the interest by youth in this format, this study aims to look at the representation of disabilities found in current graphic novels. Many recent significant writings have emerged about graphic novels. Disability is ever present in this genre of literature. The hybridity of the visual and the textual allows the creators in portraying pain and other non visible illnesses in addition to ‘n’ number of other issues and thematic concerns better, since they do not rely solely on communication of those feelings via text. Much has been written about the role of literature for youth that includes people with disabilities. Hence the humble attempt is to bring together the vast expanse of disability literature and select graphic narratives read by young adults.

The current study entitled, “The Lure of the Normal: Researching Depictions of Disability in Select Young Adult Graphic Narratives,” aims to have a detailed and in-depth look at the varied versions, differential treatments and broad spectrum of representations of disability in the amazing range of select young adult graphic narratives by unearthing the aura



that is often associated with the basic, fundamental and root cause, contained and embedded, in the so-called enigmatic term ‘normalcy.’ The presence of disability in young adult graphic narratives is a relatively new area of research in the field of literary disability studies.

This paper analyzes representations of disability experience in the visual form of a few graphic novels read by young adults. It is an analysis and interrogation of the portrayals of disability in select graphic narratives like Marc Hempel’s, Mike Carey’s and Sonny Liew’s *Re-gifters* (2007), Mike Carey’s, Jim Fern’s and Eric Nguyen’s *Crossing Midnight* (Vol. 1) (2007), Cecil C. Castellucci’s and Jim Rugg’s *The Plain Janes* (2007), Keith Giffen’s and John Rogers’ *Blue Beetle: Shell-Shocked* (2007), Sara Varon’s *Robot Dreams* (2007), Gary Whitta’s and Ted Naifeh’s *Death, Jr.* (2007) and Bob Kane’s and Sam Keith’s *Batman: Secrets* (2007). Critiques of these novels explore the varying ways in which disabilities are represented in graphic novels.

Marc Hempel’s, Mike Carey’s and Sonny Liew’s *Re-gifters* (2007), portrays a female with disability presented as orthopedic impairment (broken leg). Mike Carey’s, Jim Fern’s and Eric Nguyen’s *Crossing Midnight* (Vol.1) (2007) depicts a male with disability presented as visual impairment. Cecil C. Castellucci’s and Jim Rugg’s *The Plain Janes* (2007), delineates a male with disability presented as other health impairment (coma). Keith Giffen’s and John Rogers’ *Blue Beetle: Shell-Shocked* (2007) describes two females with disabilities presented as orthopedic impairment (uses a wheelchair) and visual impairment. Sara Varon’s *Robot Dreams* (2007), foregrounds a character of non-specific and indeterminate gender with disability presented as orthopedic impairment (paralysis). Gary Whitta’s and Ted Naifeh’s *Death, Jr.* (2007) presents two males with disabilities presented as other health impaired (connected to tubes and twins attached at the head). Bob Kane’s and Sam Keith’s *Batman: Secrets* (2007) projects a male with disability presented as emotional disturbance.

People with disabilities have often been present in the media. People with disabilities who are increasingly reflected in our society are portrayed in the above mentioned graphic novels. Males and females with disabilities are present. A number of disabilities like orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, visual impairment, multiple impairments, hearing impairment, speech impairment, emotional disturbance, traumatic brain injury and so on got represented in these narratives. However, more females are shown as pitiable and males are presented as evil. The characters are defined by their disability; disability was not considered as an aspect of their individual traits. The disabled are presented as ‘abnormal’ as opposed to the able-bodied being depicted as ‘normal.’ A vast and exhaustive list of stereotypes used to portray people with disability includes being pitiable, pathetic, miserable, object of violence, burden, nonsexual, impotent and incapable of fully participating in everyday life and so on. These portrayals most frequently fit a negative stereotypical image.

Researchers have established unflinching problems in the way people with disabilities are represented in different forms of media like books, movies, television, comics and other forms of art, with these representations often perpetuating stereotypes. The distorted representations in art, literature, film, theatre, and other forms of artistic expressions are all the more shocking and thought provoking. In *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*,



Whalen, Foss and Gray (2016) examine how delineations of disability defy and uphold stereotypes. The history of how disability has been depicted therein is loaded with problematic tropes. The majority of these depictions still fulfilled the stereotypical portrayals.

People with disabilities are featured in graphic novels for young adults. However, the portrayals are recurrently negative. These results show that authors, illustrators, and publishers have not provided honest representations of disability. The research article stresses the importance of accurate portrayals of disability. All the more, it asserts that literature that includes honest depictions of disabilities is critical and crucial for the need of acceptance and understanding of the disability experience by those of the disability communities and the non-disabled. The texts selected for study clearly demonstrates how literary outpourings continue to implicate themselves in the objectification and marginalization of persons with disabilities thereby perpetuating stale stereotypes and stigmas.

Although the novels taken up for study may or may not specifically be directed towards teens, they are directed to an audience of adults that includes an even larger population of individuals with disabilities. At the same time, the medium of graphic novels simultaneously offers distinct prospective for moulding our understanding of disability in truly profound ways. Literary texts through presentation and exploration of themes like representation of disability experience may expose the dilemma faced by the disabled. They may propose strategies for including people with disabilities in their work and social practices. They may identify and analyze societal barriers and supports that affect the lives of people with disabilities.

This research suggests that the common historical and current representation of persons with disabilities in comics and graphic novels fails to capture the complex and real experience of disability. No one representation can fully capture the experience of a specific disability, but rather acts as a case study to more fully understand an individual experience. Even as persons with disabilities have been more fully integrated into society through the advancement of disability and educational rights, representation in graphic novels remains reflective of the stereotypes first identified over forty years ago. Through these systems of representation, readers continue to learn inaccurate truths and assumptions about disability.

Good literature arouses the imagination of the reader and a vigilant reader finds it interesting to draw meanings from layered texts filled with ambiguous usages. At the same time we have to cognize that literature is a potent weapon capable of instigating change. The current trend is one of inclusion. Following the current trend of inclusion, educating people without disabilities about the various disability disorders they might encounter has become necessary. The relevance of the study lies in its attempt to erase the boundaries that create a clear divide between the able-bodied and the disabled. It deliberately foregrounds the notion that we all may get crippled, handicapped and disabled at any moment in our lives. Covid-19 pandemic has definitely restructured and reframed our hopes and understandings about the conundrums, mysteries and purposelessness of human life. It has also taught us that there is no one universal normalcy but co-existence of multiples of new normativities.



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