

## Able Texts:

### Breaking Stereotypes with/in Children's Novels

The completion of *Wild Orchid* (Brenna, 2005), my first book involving a protagonist with special needs, coincided with the beginning of my research interests related to children's literature depicting characters with disabilities. It was the fall of 2003, and I was a special education consultant, sitting in my office late one Friday afternoon, gathering loose ends and planning the week ahead. In my spare time, I had been looking for books about characters with disabilities—in particular, I was seeking authentic representations of the students I had come to know so well as a teacher, thinking that schools should really endeavour to make available to young readers the possibilities of human experience. In my free time at home, I had also been writing the first draft of a young adult novel about a teen looking for independence—a girl something like me as an adolescent, and a rather boring character, although the few quirks that had inserted themselves into Taylor Jane's original profile made her decidedly more interesting.

I pulled out the file folder containing the list of books I had located so far, noticing with disappointment the lack of fiction titles presenting characters with disabilities.

"Somebody should do some serious research on this topic!" I said to myself, thinking of books as necessary windows and mirrors for readers. I wondered whether it was the act of locating titles that would solve the inequity I currently saw in school resources, or whether there just weren't many books out there.

"Somebody should write something about a character with a disability who has the potential for a happy future, even though he or she doesn't get miraculously cured," I said to myself, thinking of the common tendency of authors to kill or cure these characters. Then I thought about my own developing teen protagonist, Taylor Jane Simon. As I thought about her particular and unique characteristics, I began to see her as somewhere on the autism spectrum. A few ideas came to me regarding what I could add to her profile that would

move her a little further along that spectrum, perhaps even into a full-blown diagnosis. Asperger's Syndrome interested me because I had been working with a number of students experiencing its effects, and I wanted to learn more about it.

"Maybe I should be that writer," I said to myself. "And," I continued, pondering the PhD I'd been thinking of starting for so long, "maybe I should be that researcher." I now have eight published books for young people, with a ninth in press, and I finished my PhD in 2010, focusing on children's literature with a dissertation called *Characters with Disabilities in Contemporary Children's Novels: Portraits of Three Authors in a Frame of Canadian Texts*.

One of the things I addressed in my dissertation is the importance of stories. In my own family, a storytelling mother paved the way for rich learning. Considering what she taught and modelled through relating her own stories, my own views on inclusion and diversity are no surprise.

I am sitting at the kitchen table waiting for lunch. I am five years old and I have just come home from Kindergarten. My mother is mixing milk with the contents of a can of Campbell's mushroom soup and stirring it in a pot on the stove. She is telling me about how things were, when she was a child. "Tell another old one," I say, meaning one of the old times' stories. "Tell *Johnny and the Pear*."

*It is 1924 and my mother is a grade five student attending a one-room school in southern Saskatchewan. "Seven-year-old Johnny and his immigrant parents had just moved into the district, and the students were not being very receptive to him. On this particular day in September, a season when cases of peaches, pears, and plums were brought home from town to be preserved in glass jars for winter use, the girls are sitting under the shade of a caragana hedge, eating noon lunch. Mary opens her pail and gives a squeal of disappointment. On top of her sandwiches there is a piece of tissue paper, but the pear her mother had promised is missing. Immediately the students think of Johnny."* (Brenna, 2008, p. 255)

As my mother relates the rest of the story, her voice is thick with regret. The students chase Johnny down the road. He runs until he cannot run anymore, and then he falls in the dirt. The students pounce. They assure him that if he owns up to taking the pear, they'll let him go. Dutifully, he confesses. Someone runs and tells the teacher. Johnny is herded back into the school, where he receives the strap. That afternoon the room is uncomfortably quiet, except for Johnny's sobs. The next morning, Mary has a secret. "My mother found the pear, forgotten, on the shelf at home," she says (M. Stillborn, personal communication, 2008).

I watch my mother carefully as she finishes the story and spoons soup into my bowl. Her nose is red, and her eyes are all watery. I smile. My mother is very predictable. Along with the soup, there is a Prem sandwich and

rice pudding for dessert. I am hungry, and I eat.

—Brenna, 2010a, pp. 178–179

Other stories from my mother, in the telling and the retelling, support an understanding that we are all equal in some way in our importance on a community landscape—equal and valuable. Perhaps this is a prairie mentality from the Saskatchewan Depression, when whatever people had was shared. Perhaps my mother was a trailblazer, paving the way to school inclusion for children who are differently abled before policies about integration came into public favour. Her story about Eddy certainly underpins my own inclusionary philosophy as a teacher and a writer.

After a year of teacher training, my mother is in charge of twenty children in grades one to eight. She has not been given any special teaching strategies for students who might have challenges. There is an older boy at this school, Eddy, who has unique mannerisms and learning needs, a boy who, in a different period of medicine, might have qualified for an autism diagnosis. A neighbour woman asks my mother how she is getting along with this student. "He's okay," she replies. "But sometimes he gets on my nerves." On Monday this boy is not at school, nor is he there on Tuesday. My mother telephones to a tearful parent who says, "I heard what you said about my son," and then who loudly hangs up the telephone. My mother walks a mile through the snow to the boy's farm. When Eddy's mother opens the door, my mother says, her lips trembling, "I'm very sorry. I did say that. When I'm tired, any of the children get on my nerves. I like your son, and I want him back at school." Difficult words to say, yet they bring relief. Eddy is back in class the next day. My mother's emotion in

the telling and retelling of this tale is palpable.

My mother has learned an important lesson, and, through her telling and retelling of this story, so have I. No longer is she the only one whose eyes are damp at the close of her stories. In adulthood, I cannot tell any of these stories without feeling the emotion my mother connects to them. And that is one of the legacies my mother has provided: not only do I have these intergenerational family stories, but I have absorbed the emotional background that accompanies them in her telling.

—Brenna, 2010a, pp. 182–183

Since completing my dissertation, I have continued to look at patterns and trends within and among books portraying characters with disabilities, and some interesting changes have appeared since the early "kill or cure" mentality of authors. I'm happy to see that endings in children's literature don't generally include the death of the character, nor does religion intervene to effect a miraculous "recovery," as when the disability suddenly vanishes in a blur of spirituality.

Other patterns in contemporary fiction are apparent, however. Texts in my study samples, for example, gravitate toward intermediate and young adult audiences, neglecting a readership between ages 8 and 11. It also appears that although disabilities of various kinds are more often and more realistically portrayed, other aspects of difference have been ignored—namely, differences in sexuality, ethnicity, and religion. While characters may have a disability, other unique traits, such as particular cultural backgrounds or minority sexual orientations, are

not included alongside. In terms of genre, there seems to be a dearth of fantasy and mystery titles supporting a protagonist with a disability. Perhaps related to the inability of authors to fathom a character with a disability working in fantasy or mystery contexts is the lack of characters in realistic fiction who travel from one place to another.

Unlike the prevalence in classic texts of such disabilities as polio and blindness, there doesn't seem to be a predominance of particular disabilities in contemporary texts for young people, and one diagnosis is very rare indeed. I have only been able to locate one fiction title where a character has a Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), and that title happens to be my own intermediate-age novel *The Moon Children* (Brenna, 2007). *The Moon Children* was written after *Wild Orchid* as I continued to represent characters with traits similar to those of children with whom I had become familiar in my work as a special educator. None of my fictional characters are actually based on any real kids, but I've thought about characteristics of particular kids that I wanted to adapt and include for the purposes of breaking stereotypes.

As a teacher, I had often felt powerless to assist children with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), one of the diagnoses under the FASD umbrella. My creation of the character of Billy Ray—a ten-year-old boy who suffers from the effects of prenatal alcohol in various ways that include an inability to read, severe hyperactivity, and a heart defect—was one cathartic step that made me feel as if perhaps my voice might make a

difference in prevention, as well as in understanding and support, for people with FASD. Billy Ray is a gifted storyteller, and his friendship with another character in the story becomes the hinge on which the plot turns, a plot that includes a cameo of Chrysta, his strongly supportive biological mother—the kind of mother who makes mistakes, as we all do, but learns from them. To me, Chrysta Lee Ray is the best kind of hero—someone who rises above truly difficult challenges and lets her inherent strength shine.

I wonder what it would feel like to have a baby with differences caused by maternal alcohol consumption, to be told by doctors and educators that my child's physical and mental symptoms were rooted in a disorder that I had inadvertently created. No wonder silence has surrounded this particular disability; considerations related to FASD are heartbreaking. Yet change is not going to occur unless people speak out, and while this book has not been on any bestseller lists, it is the book I am most proud of. Writing it involved taking action toward social justice in a way that I hope can make a difference.

The idea that stereotypes about disability can be dislodged with children's fiction is an alluring concept, making some books particularly able texts within a social justice framework. Similarly, the idea is certainly provocative that, in order to use books for social change, one must unpack stereotypes about disability within the texts themselves. Getting it right is an objective that has resonated in the very core of my writing self, a goal that has caused me to burn the midnight oil in order to figure out

nuances related to particular abilities and disabilities and translate these nuances into characters that I hope “seem real.”

In addition to giving volume to the little voice in my conscience demanding authenticity, how has my research on children's literature affected my own writing? In the first place, just naming a particular diagnosis—Taylor Jane's Asperger's Syndrome—occurred as a result of my awareness of unheard voices in this regard. Perhaps this works against the commonplace, helping this text operate as a stereotype-breaker. I certainly hope so!

Second, conceptualizing Taylor's character as someone who identified with adult texts—in particular the works of Harold Pinter (in *Wild Orchid*), Samuel Beckett (in *Waiting for No One*, the second book of the series), and Jean Paul Sartre (in *The White Bicycle*, the third and final book)—occurred as the result of an unconscious understanding that intertextuality has been limited as far as “reading up.” Characters with disabilities that read or remember young children's books have certainly been more common than characters selecting mature reading material about which to proselytize.

Third, taking a character and moving her into titles in a connected series may also serve to break a stereotype in the field of children's literature where a protagonist with a disability rarely carries more than one title. Taylor Jane will have supported three books by the time I am finished with her. In the last installment to Taylor's story (*White Bicycle*), I fully address another trend I've noticed in contemporary titles about characters with disabili-

ties: these characters rarely travel. In response to this environmental over-stability, I send Taylor to France in *The White Bicycle*. Yes, she has transition challenges and language challenges, but these are not her greatest challenge, which involves overcoming her mother in a determined quest for independence.

The initial title in my historical fiction series, *Falling for Henry* (Brenna, 2011), was originally created as a stand-alone; however, Kate Allen is a very able character that resonates with me because of her anxiety disorder—her claustrophobia is too much like my own to want her story to end. In addition to her adventures with a charming Prince Henry, soon to become

Henry VIII, perhaps she will have some involvement with the Princes in the Tower . . . but that story is still in the making. Only time will tell!

*When she's not writing children's books, Beverley Brenna is conducting research and teaching classes in Elementary Education at the University of Saskatchewan. Her research interests include children's literature, the reading and writing processes, and special education. She lives on an acreage near Saskatoon with her husband, three sons, a dog, a cat, two parakeets, two frilled lizards, a frog, two tarantulas, and many, many fish. More information about her published books can be found at <http://www.beverleybrenna.com>.*

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## Call for 2013 Halle Award Nominations

The NCTE Richard W. Halle Award for Outstanding Middle Level Educator honors a middle level educator who has consistently worked to improve the quality of middle school education and middle school educators, especially in the English language arts. Originally established in 1996 by the Junior High/Middle School Assembly, this award pays special tribute to the person who has worked to improve schools and schooling for the middle level—teacher, principal, college faculty, curriculum specialist, or supervisor.

Nomination information can be found on the NCTE website at [www.ncte.org/awards/halle](http://www.ncte.org/awards/halle) and must be submitted no later than **June 1, 2013**. Results will be announced in September, and the award will be presented at the 2013 Annual Convention in Boston, Massachusetts, during the Middle Level Get-Together.

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