The Representation of Disability in Children’s Literature

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Statement of Originality

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Synopsis

The representation of disability in children’s literature in an area that is severely under researched yet is something that is relevant to us all. Disability is an extremely fluid minority, with people moving between the able-bodied and the disabled throughout their lifetime, some on multiple occasions. It is therefore extremely important that the representation of disability in our literature, particularly in children’s literature, is one that is accurate and diverse.

This thesis will be examining the way that disability is created within society based on our understanding of ‘the norm’ and the way we perceive the body. I will be discussing the binary relationship between the able-bodied and the disabled throughout this thesis and the need to break down socially constructed barriers and reclassify these two groups.

I will be examining the way characters with a disability and ‘the body’ are treated within two classic children’s texts, J.M. Barrie’s Peter Pan and Victor Hugo’s The Hunchback of Notre Dame, before progressing on to a contemporary children’s text Finding Nemo. Additionally, I will be conducting a close analysis of two recent picture books, The Black Book of Colours by Menena Cottin, originally written in Spanish, and the Indigenous Australian text Two Mates by Melanie Prewett.
Within this thesis I will be exploring the ways disability is represented and used in children’s literature. The concept of disability in children’s literature is one that I believe is under researched within the academic world, as 20% of society is diagnosed with a disability. It is a realistic future we could all face, and is an extremely relevant topic for all (Hughes 35; Preston 56). The representation of disability in children’s literature contributes to how child readers develop and shape their understanding of disability in society (Ayala 103; Hughes 39). Disability is an issue that spans across all cultures, religions and genders, and acceptance should be modelled not only by society in forms of social interactions, but through the literature that children engage with on a daily basis. Failure to develop characters with a disability as valued voices can perpetuate inaccurate ideas about people with a disability, and their place in society, for children.

My use of the term ‘disability’ in this thesis encompasses behavioural, physical and intellectual disabilities in an attempt to examine not only the disabilities being portrayed, but the types of disabilities being portrayed as well. The study of disability and the role it plays within society is in no way a new concept, but rather the treatment of it has evolved over time, coinciding with the trends in diagnosis (Ayala 110). Through applying the work of Foucault and his creation of the ‘the body’, I examine the construction and potential misrepresentation of disability in children’s literature.

The creation of ‘the body’ will form a focus in my examination of disability in children’s literature. The notion of the able-bodied verse the disabled-bodied
human is problematic. “No one is ever more than temporarily able-bodied” (Brekenridge & Volger 349) and this idea often creates a level of anxiety in the able-bodied person. Foucault’s examination of the creation of the body takes place in three distinct stages. First there is the hierarchical observation (surveillance) where we examine those around us, making note of the differences in appearance (Sullivan 29). Next there is the act of normalising judgement, which I will explore in more depth within this paper, where the categorising of the able-bodied and the disabled occurs, before finally the examination, which utilises facilities such as hospitals, schools and prisons to take part in correcting a persons body before assimilating them back into the community as productive members (Sullivan 29). The examination of this process will become vital in understanding the representation of disability in children’s literature, as more often than not the “problems faced by any marginalised group of people lie, not in their bodies, but in the oppression they face” (Clare 359). This means that it is not the body itself that is creating this marginalisation for those with a disability, but rather the construction and constraints that society places upon them because of this.

The misrepresentation of disability in children’s literature has seen the creation of three strong stereotypes for disabled characters; the villain, the innocent and the inspirational. I will be using two classic texts, Peter Pan by J.M. Barrie, and The Hunchback of Notre Dame, by Victor Hugo, to examine the role of these stereotypes in the creation of the disabled body, as well as the contemporary classic Disney film Finding Nemo. Adding to this, I will be closely analysing the representation of disability within two modern children’s picture books, The Black
*Book of Colours*, originally published in Spanish by Menena Cottin, and the Australian text, *Two Mates*, by Melanie Prewett. In examining these stereotypes of disability in children’s literature, I will be exploring the portrayal of popular children’s characters with a disability and the literary effect these have had on cementing the creation of ‘the body’ in the minds of children.

When examining disability it is important to also examine the changing societal and medical trends for both diagnosis and the attitude towards those with a disability. The portrayal of disability within society is best examined through an overview of the relatively new field of disability studies. The recognition and diagnosis of behavioural and learning disabilities, such as Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Autism Spectrum Disorder, has seen an introduction of these disabilities into children’s literature, with a notable increase occurring from 1989 onwards (Ayala 110). This does not, however, correspond with an equally high rate of emotional disabilities that are being diagnosed, with an incredibly narrow range of related books available to children (Ayala 110).

Paul Longmore explores the notion of disability being caused by supernatural forces within ‘Uncovering the Hidden History of People with Disability’, where disability was not only seen as a medical condition, but pre-eighteenth century doctors also felt that disability stemmed from a supernatural source. Disability was punishment for the wrongs of your ancestors, or the sins of yourself and the ‘sufferers’ required cleansing of their ailments through invasive, painful and embarrassing procedures (355). While there was a shift away from this supernatural view of disability, the
invasive, painful and embarrassing procedures continued throughout the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, where those with disabilities were sterilised to breed out the contamination and create only ‘productive’ bodies (Longmore 359). In contemporary society, the creation of disability can be viewed through two separate models; medical and social (Crow 3; Hughes 38; Preston 56; Shakespeare 289).

The medical model refers to the way that the physical nature of the disability acts as a barrier that prevents those with a disability interacting within society (Hughes 38). Historically, this medical model coincides with the attitude of ‘fixing’ or ‘curing’ all disabilities so that one can effectively interact with their community (Allen 97). As society has progressed away from the supernatural theories of disability and emerged into an age of rapid change and social and scientific progression, there is a clear line drawn between the refined abled body person and the unrefined disabled (Hughes 19). Disability has become an aspect of human life that is not accepted by society as normal, but rather something that can be treated and cured (Blackmore & Hodgkins 75). This desire to ‘fix’ the disability is a reflection of the discomfort that many feel when confronted with disability in their day-to-day life. There is little consideration when ‘curing’ those with disabilities of the impact on identity this process may incur (Hughes 18).

The turn of the 20th century saw a rise in minority groups lobbying for equity. As disability driven social movements took place, encouraged by other minority movements, the dominant view of disability shifted to what is now known as the
'social model' (Longmore 362; Shakespeare 289). The ‘social model’ incorporates the idea that it is society that creates the disability, not the physical nature of the person. Society dictates what a normal and productive body looks like through catering only for those that have this particular make up. The creation of ‘the body’ influences the way which we view disability. It is society that creates steps that a paraplegic can’t climb, or a focus on written text that is hard for those with dyslexia to comprehend. In acknowledging that it is society that has created these disabilities, the ‘social model’ advocates society taking some responsibility for the construction of disability, that is, it emphasises a paradigm shift away from disability as a deficit to societal workings as problematic.

It is important when considering the social model of disability studies to consider what ways we could lessen the extent to which we disable people from interacting in our community through unpacking and broadening our understanding of what the body should look like and the way it should function. The importance of children’s literature in this instance cannot be overlooked. Literature contributes to a child’s developing perception of societal and cultural norms; what is perceived as acceptable, what is not and the diversities within it (Ayala 103). It is not just the social influences, but also the cultural and historical aspects of children’s literature that influence children when interacting with literature (Hunt 1). Reflection on children’s literature demonstrates that “by representing certain groups in certain ways, children’s books [...] are] promoting certain values” (Sarlands 41). If we look at literature as the means through which a child accepts their surroundings, it is vital
that the interactions we display in our children’s literature demonstrates multiple voices, developing a greater inclusivity for the audience, regardless of their context.

The importance of the personal context is explored by Emiliano Ayala within ‘“Poor little things” and “Brave little souls”: The portrayal of individuals with disabilities in children’s literature’ who conducted an extensive research project exploring the portrayal and diversity of disabilities in children’s literature. One of the key areas of concern that Ayala identified in this research was the lack of diversity in the characters. This is a common theme that also appeared frequently within my own research, and will be explored through the analysis of Captain Hook, Quasimodo and Nemo. While Ayala’s paper is quite old, published in 1996, these trends still seem apparent today.

While there was a move towards the inclusion of multiple disabilities in the one text, there is still a majority of male-only portrayals, with 52%, overshadowing the 30% of females. The remaining 18% represented texts where there were examples of multiple genders being presented in the one text (Ayala 110). This does not come as a surprise and looking at the 5 male-based characters discussed within this essay, it is a trend that still continues today. Continuing to demonstrate the narrow diversity portrayed in children’s literature, 50% of books contained Caucasian characters as the protagonist, and an incredible 80% of these children’s books were written in English (Ayala 111).

I will mention on a number of occasions the need to authentically represent disability within children’s literature. When referring to this idea of authenticity, I
am discussing the need to represent disability in a manner that is a true reflection of our society. This includes, but is not limited to, the differences in social, economic and gender experiences. In order to truly allow this authentic representation of disability within children’s literature and wider society, it is vital we examine our own preconceived ideas about body, culture and disability in order to create and portray characters that are diverse and challenge these notions that are perceived as the norm.

When looking at the construction of our language it becomes clear that disable is a term that classifies what is not able. The fluid nature of language means that signified meanings of disabled and abled are constantly shifting, while the binary nature between the two will always allow for classification. As a society we label those who are accepted as advanced, civilised and productive ‘able-bodied’ (the norm), while those who are not viewed as conforming to this mould become the disabled (the abnormal). With this classification, the positive attributes of humanity are instantly associated with the able bodied, such as productivity, while the disabled experience the negative connotations this category inherently carries, the implication being that they are a burden on society (Campbell 213).

Barry Allen, within ‘Foucault’s Nominalism’, examines Foucault’s writing on ‘power’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘normalisation’ in an attempt to understand the way disability is shaped within our world. Allen explores Foucault’s ideas on normalisation as pivotal to disability studies and defining the term disability itself. Foucault explores our overwhelming need to categorise our world and the impact that this has on the way
which we create the notion of the body. This creation of the body in turn creates our understanding of the abnormal and the disabled. Those that are different to the majority, those who are unable to access the world in a manner the majority deems appropriate are categorised together and given the term ‘disabled’, which itself holds a number of negative connotations about the ways a person can contribute to the community. Thinking about the conditions that lead to the creation of disability in the real world is vital before progressing to its construction in the fictional world of children’s literature so we can understand the very roots of these misrepresentations (Breckenridge & Volger 355).

The very creation of these minority groups, including the disabled, strongly influences the manner in which society views them. The human race is perpetually striving towards understanding our surroundings. This creates the need to organize and classify the world, creating binary relationships between a symbol and its inferred meaning; or the signifiers (word or symbol) and the signified (the meaning we gain from it) (Goodley 183). Names do not hold with them one solid meaning but rather a series of descriptions and ideas associated with a particular object or concept. If something does not meet the descriptions we associate with a name, it automatically becomes abnormal. This is ultimately what occurs when we examine the social construct that is disability. It is because of this that we must then organise the abnormal human into categories such as ‘disabled’ or ‘ill’. As this process occurs, we are transforming the body itself into an object. Foucault believes that “the objective is to render the bodies docile” through this process so as they may be “subjected, used, transformed and improved” to meet the needs of society
The social model is based heavily on the notion that it is society that categorises and discriminates against those with physical, intellectual or emotional differences, and therefore disables them from accessing society in the ‘normal’ fashion. People with a disability are categorised so because they are unfit in some way and therefore are not properly human (Campbell 214). The relationship between the normal and abnormal is vital here in understanding that the creation of disability can only occur when comparing a human to the majority. When a majority of the human race acts, looks, or thinks in a particular way, this is defined as the norm. Once the norm has been established, often subconsciously, the majority structure society in a way that allows easy access for these ‘norms’. This is where the disabling process takes place. Within ‘Stalking Ableism: Using Disability to Expose ‘Abled’ Narcissism’, Fiona Campbell argues that the practice of labelling serves only the government to ensure that they can map, order and distinguish between the able and the disable, as well as providing a sense of comfort for the able bodied that they have mastered their own mind and body (214, 216). We find comfort in the belief that we are the norm, and that we are able to access society. Instead of pushing to redefine the body in a more inclusive manner, we create institutions, such as hospitals, which are designed to medically classify even further those whose body does not conform to the societal norm. We are able to classify as ‘able’ or ‘disable’ and from there into ‘curable’ or ‘incurable’ (Sullivan 30).

Disability is often seen as having “too little or too much of a body” and medical
advancements are designed transform those with a disability into the “normative human...an able-bodied adult” (Breckenridge & Volger 350). As technology improves, we are constantly seeking to ‘cure’ those with a disability, to improve their body and allow it to re-enter society in a meaningful and productive manner. This may include utilising resources such as prophetic limbs or cochlear implants to ‘reclaim’ the body that has been lost, damaged or malfunctioning in the eyes of the norm (Clare 363).

These distinctions of the abled and the disabled do not allow a person with a disability to coexist within societal structures, and places pressure upon them to constantly strive towards treatments for their conditions so they can be cured and re-enter society as a normal functioning, able-bodied member. While literature has made great progression in terms of acceptance and depiction of diversity through a variety of social movements over the past 50 years, we still fail to recognize disability as a “reasonable and an acceptable form of diversity” as those with a disability are yet to “establish their entitlement to exist unconditionally” as their own identity within their own body (Campbell 213, 215). If our aim is to move towards a greater acceptance of disability within our society, children’s literature provides a powerful forum for unpacking these categories currently accepted within society, breaking down the binary relationship between the able and the disabled. It is only through questioning our own beliefs, our own preconceived ideas, and identifying where these originate that we will be able to make any meaningful progression towards acceptance of bodies that contribute to society in a way that is not the norm. Categorising the individual “attaches him to his own identity,
imposes a land of truth on him which he must recognise and others must recognise him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects” (Foucault 331, 1982). In doing this within children’s literature, we will see this acceptance move throughout society as the child progresses into adulthood.

The creation of identity is an area which is impacted significantly by the categorising of the disabled as often a person has their entire identity resting on the recognition of their disability. This is something that has been recognised as problematic and has been addressed within disability studies in the form of the ‘People First’ movement (Snow). This has seen the change in language from, for example, the ‘autistic child’ to ‘the child with autism’. While this is a fairly minor adjustment to the way we speak, the impact of language should not be overlooked in this regards. In simply changing this wording around we have placed an emphasis on the child, as opposed to the disability, drawing attention away from the disability as the child’s only defining feature. The very use of language is instrumental in redefining ‘the body’, in this case, the ‘disabled body’. Judith Butler, drawing from Derrida’s notion of iterability, asks “What does it mean for a word not only to name, but also in some sense to perform it and, in particular, to perform what it names? On the one hand it may seem that the word – for the moment we do not know which word or which kind of word – enacts what it names: where the ‘what’ of ‘what it names’ remains distinct from the name itself and the performance of that ‘what’” (199). While Butler is focusing on gender, her argument can be applied to disability, in particular, the label of ‘disabled’. This can be taken further moving from the way we used signifiers within our language to their signified associations, the objects or
ideals that go with them (Butler 199). She argues that “If a word in this sense might be said to ‘do’ a thing, then it appears that a word not only signifies a thing, but that this signification will also be an enactment of the thing” (200). The continued repetition of how a disabled character looks, behaves and is received by society because of their subjectivity as “disabled”, and as only disabled, becomes an “injurious word within such a framework, the word that not only names a social subject, but constructs that subject in the naming, and constructs that subject through a violating interpellation [...]” (204). We are constantly being exposed to what ‘the body’ should be seen as and how ‘the body’ works, leading to the homogenised notion of what the body ‘is’ (Butler 220). In portraying a variety of bodies that look and function in a wide range of ways, we can begin to move away from reinforcing the way that western culture is currently developing the body and in doing so begin to challenge the power of those that name and the way in which such naming expects an associated performance – whether that is gender or notions of disabled (Butler 221).

Jenny Kendrick explores the importance of language within the article ‘Signifying Something: Images of learning disability in fiction for children’. In doing this, Kendrick explores the impact which our expectations of the signifier may have on the signified, basing her argument around the quote “It is a tale, Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.” (Macbeth Act V: Scene v). This Shakespeare quote influenced author William Faulkner, from which his novel The Sound and the Fury draws its name. This is a story of three brothers, one of which, Benjy, has a learning difficulty. Kendrick explores the idea that Benjy’s ‘sound and
fury’ expresses extreme distress at the disappearance of his sister (1). In changing our expectations about what the phrase ‘sound and fury’ may signify, extreme distress as opposed to nothing, it is apparent that in adjusting our own notions attached to a word, we can in turn adjust what this term signifies within society.

This idea that changing our expectation of a word allows a person to perform their identity without an attached expectation is also explored by Kendrick through the examination of Dickens and Wills. In an 1853 text, ‘Idiots’, Dickens and Wills also take this *Macbeth* quote and appropriate it, granting it new meaning. Dickens and Wills state that “It is a tale, Told by an idiot, full of sound instruction, Signifying something.” (Kendrick 8). There is a distinct difference between the *Macbeth* original and the Dickens and Wills paraphrase of these lines, and the difference in meaning is a very powerful one. One looks at disability, mental or otherwise, as something that has no significance, which has nothing to add to or offer society. Dickens and Wills’ exploration of this same idea instead looks to expand what we know and accept about disability. If we change our expectation of the word ‘idiot’ we allow ourselves to see it performed differently, so we can see this importance, rather than nothing.

In Barry Allen’s examination of Foucault, he spends some time examining what purpose the creation of ‘the norm’ has on society, disability studies and our perception of the body. Normalisation occurs when we name objects, which is a vital part of our ability to communicate. Keeping the construction of disability in mind, it can therefore be assumed that children’s literature only goes further to
highlight these short comings in their disabled characters. With most children’s books also being accompanied by illustrations, the child is exposed both aurally and visually to characters that belong and characters that don't, reaffirming what is the normal body and what is not. The act of normalisation often leads to the use of group defining terms such as ‘them’ and ‘us’. We often find it easier to identify ourselves within our world as what we are not before progressing to what we are. The creation of the Other is often adapted in this situation, meaning that we are referring to those Other than us, and in doing so, projecting all of the negative and unaccepted qualities of humanity onto them as well (Campbell 213; Ghai 274).

Dominant Western ideology uses normalisation and categorisation to construct individual identity, which is explored by Lacanian theory in three distinct stages (Goodley 182). For the first 6 months of a child’s life, they rely heavily on the identity of their primary caregiver. There is no notable separation between their primary caregivers world and their own, and they spend a majority of this time familiarising themselves with the functions of their bodies rather than of their mind. This is a stage of their life which is driven by the desire to fulfil their own needs and is referred to as the ‘real stage’ by Jacques Lacan (Goodley 182). The process of self-identifying does not begin to emerge in any meaningful manner until the child is between 6 and 18 months old. During this time they begin to notice and acknowledge their physical appearance, and begin to make associations about what the ‘normal’ body looks like. They become captivated by their reflections in mirrors and are able to start noticing physical differences and identifying features between themselves and others. This stage is referred to as the imaginary phase (Goodley
This would be the stage where a child may start to notice physical disabilities as differentiating features.

The third phase, referred to as the symbolic phase, “sees the child enter culture” (Goodley 183). This phase is between 18 months and 4 years of age and is the time when disability should be introduced in a manner that encourages acceptance. This is where they begin engaging with spoken, written and visual texts and develop their own categories for the world, based on the knowledge they are receiving from those they interact with (Goodley 183). This is where children’s literature plays its strongest part in developing a child’s identity as well as the identity they assign others within the community. This is the stage where normalisation is occurring and it is therefore the stage where we should be encouraging our children to expand their understanding of the norm to increase acceptance of disability within society. This is where questioning what makes a productive and highly functioning body breaks down the binary relationship of the abled and the disabled and fosters an environment where minority groups are not othered. The family provides the context for a child’s development and should therefore be fostering these positive ideas, but to do this in an effective manner, we must first have the appropriate resources, which include children’s literature with authentic representations of disability that actively seek to provide a diverse range of characters (Goodley 182).

Children’s literature is a unique area, where the reader and the author are from two very different groups within society. Jacqueline Rose explores this notion throughout her work, stating that “children’s fiction sets up a world in which the
adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between” (2). There is no form of literature that displays such an obvious and unashamed gap between the author and the reader. The adult defines when childhood occurs and when a person enters and exits this notion. The child characters represented within these books are constructions of the inherently innocent child, free from sin that is so often portrayed (Rose 1).

Children’s literature often takes on the issue of disability in two very distinct manners. The story becomes centred on the disability, and the way this visually manifests itself, rather than a character, or disability is ignored entirely. Often the disability becomes the focal point of the narrative. When this occurs, the character itself loses its authenticity as their personal context goes undeveloped. Failing to authentically develop these characters only perpetuates the misrepresentation of the body and the personality of the disabled throughout society. The intended child reader is presented with a representation of disability where ‘the body’ has been understood as ‘abnormal’, that is, different to what is considered the norm. Characters are given generic personal backgrounds and their disability is not treated as a valid part of society. Contrasting with this are authors who focus on disability as the only significant aspect of the character’s identity. Once again we see the author failing to develop a sustained and authentic representation of disability which empowers and forms a strong voice within our literature.

There is a great complexity in representing both children and disability in literature
as they often cross a multitude of minorities and oppressed groups, including gender differences, sexuality, race, culture, socioeconomic and religious to name just a few. It is possible for the child and the disabled to cross two, three, four or even more of these minority groups, creating layer upon layer of voicelessness for them to overcome. How is it possible then for us to effectively represent disability in children’s literature? The aim should be, and should always be, to open and allow a space to be created that allows minority voices to be heard. The adult is perpetually speaking on behalf of the child, representing how they believe a child interacts with the world, or perhaps more importantly, creating a child figure free from all the sins and misgivings that they as an adult hold (Rose 17). Children’s literature is a portrayal of a power relationship between adult and child, yet it never reveals this to the child reader. My argument is that if we reconsider how we construct ‘the body’ in children’s literature, we shift the traditional expectations of heteronormative, able-bodied protagonists.

Throughout the process of developing these binary relationships between the abled and the disabled, we begin to see the formation of the Other, and the notion of the oppressed vs. the oppressor (Ghai 273). The voice of the oppressed is not given space, in this case the oppressed being the disabled and the child. Countless texts where a character has a disability of any kind are not actually constructed by a person with a disability, which only goes to silence the disabled further by misrepresenting their voice. Both the child and the disabled fit into this postcolonial concept perfectly, as they are unable to gain a voice unless the oppressor (adults, the able-bodied and often both) open the space for them. It is fundamentally
impossible for us to access a text which contains only the child’s voice, as the rest of society, the adult portion of society, is responsible for the publication of the texts we read. What becomes difficult with both disability and children in literature is that those that it is being targeted to and written about have little to no input into the creation. Hence the need for constructions of the disabled child or character to be more than just an oddity, to be more than just an abnormal disability, instead they should be seen as a productive and empowered member of society.

When examining the implications that normativity has on the creation of the body, and its influence on disability, we must first explore deeper “the process of creating a certain type of social subject that is deemed desirable, acceptable, legitimate, and authentic in the cultural domain” (Shimanoff, Elia & Gust 1006). This normative practice relies heavily on which sociocultural group is seen as the majority and of these, what traits a majority of them have. Once these norms are established, they become “accepted as the way things are, and placed beyond critique” going only to develop “normative identities…that adhere to and maintain the current system of heteropatriarchy” (Shimanoff, Elia & Gust, 1006-7). When looking at the extensive impact that children’s literature can have on society, a strong importance should be placed on representing disability in a manner that socialises children in positive and inclusive ways. The representation of characters with a disability should appear empowering, where their disability is a part of their personality, but only a section of it, taking into account the other sociocultural aspects that come with a fully developed persona.
Often coinciding with the creation of the Other is the objectification of minority groups. This is no different in the case of people with a disability (Shakespeare 290). In removing a sense of individual identity through homogenizing the representation of disability through society, it becomes far too easy for a majority group to take this group classification even further and begin to view people with a disability as objects.

When examined under the lens of second wave feminist and Freudian fetishism theories, the significance of the way the body is represented begins to play a major role. The body is objectified in a number of ways to appeal to varying emotional responses. The exploitation of a minority group is not a new concept within the literary world, yet unlike the multiple race and gender based campaigns for equality, there have been limited social movements to rectify the objectification of those with a disability, which is reflected throughout children’s literature (Ayala 104; Longmore 364). If we examine the progression of the representation of women within literature, it is fair to say that in the past 30 years there has been a significant shift in the treatment of women and this has opened up a space for the woman’s voice to be heard, particularly in westernized countries. These social movements, and the introduction of feminism into society, have seen these dramatic shifts take place in the treatment of minority groups.

While disability is a different minority group to women, a lot of the second wave feminist theory can be aptly applied to disability studies. The idea of objectification is a major aspect that both of these areas share, but is represented in different
ways. Women are objectified in a sexual manner, using their body to appeal to men and are therefore used by advertising companies to encourage male clients to purchase their goods. Even other females can be swayed by the sexualisation of the woman, as they strive to be as desirable as the women in the advertisements. With a strong push for equal rights and the empowerment of women that has transpired in recent decades, women have been able to capitalise on this sexual objectification and the way their ‘body’ is created and portrayed in literature, media and advertising.

Objectified disability is used for a different emotional response, often, one of pity. This is a tactic used to encourage people to purchase items or donate in an attempt to improve the quality of life for the person with a disability (Shakespeare 287). This is designed to create a sympathetic response and does not help reshape the representation of disability within our society. Evoking pity or sympathy for a group of people, rather than encouraging respect for and wider awareness of what this group has to offer disempowers both people with a disability and the child reader (able bodied or not) reading about them.

Foucault’s exploration of power and its application to an examination of society is vital in exploring the way society accepts and represents those with a disability. According to O’Farrell, “power produces particular types of behaviours” (101) and this sort of disciplinary power is used to regulate desired behaviours within society, guiding and developing the ‘norm’ (Blackmore & Hodgkins 75). Inherently this means that those in power control children’s literature, which is those outside the
disability minority (106). This knowledge only highlights that the representation of
disability is severely lacking an authentic voice.

This creation of the norm and the desire to fix bodies that do not meet these
definitions are examined within *Michel Foucault* by Clare O’Farrell. O’Farrell,
through the work of Foucault, argues that holding the social assumptions of what is
the norm inherently means that the human race does not actually progress. Rather,
we are only discovering truths that have always existed as more knowledgeable
scientists are born (75). If this is in fact the case, we are only perpetuating a
homogenous society, one where differences are not embraced, but fixed (76). With
this concept in mind, we are only then creating a society that does not view the
disabled body as a valid group within it.

With power, according to Foucault, comes knowledge, with the knowledge we view
as true and valuable defined by those in power creating a binary relationship
between the two notions (O’Farrell 101). This relationship between power and
knowledge can be extended even further, with the relationship between those in
power becoming reliant on those out of power (Blackmore & Hodgkins 76; O’Farrell
99). Without this relationship, there is no meaning behind the term. Power requires
a subject, object or person to hold power over and to manipulate or control to a
certain extent. Foucault’s application of his power/knowledge theory allows society
to creates categories and appropriate identities that are assigned to these
categories to determine who does and does not fit this mould (Nunkosing &
Haydon-Laurelut 202). Shakespeare describes turning those with a disability into an
object, such as, those in power are able to create caricatures of those with a disability, and transfer these misrepresentations to children’s literature. Children’s literature allows the child to be governed and demonstrates to them the appropriate way to behave and interact. The abled portion of society holds the power.

Foucault’s theories on power and knowledge are then able to draw together the elements of power and knowledge and express them through discourse. A discourse as explored by Foucault is a “system of representation and signifiers, where rules and practices apply to set the tone and detail of what, and how topics and concepts can be constructed” (Blackmore & Hodgkins 75). When examining the construction, or discourse, of disability within society it becomes apparent that this concept is something that is derived from the function of society, as opposed to a construction of identity by those with a disability (Blackmore & Hodgkins 76).

Often when a character with a disability is represented within a text as the main character, their disability is the focus of the story. This could serve as an educational tool, a plot twist or as an inspirational story. More often than not, however, the character with a disability is a secondary one. This provides the illusion that a space has been opened up for the voice of those with a disability, where in fact it is only further restricting them, as the way they interact within the story becomes dependent on the protagonist, the able-bodied voice.

Throughout centuries of children’s literature there have been many examples of characters which could fit this, but I will be focusing on the representation of
Captain Hook, from J.M. Barrie’s classic children’s tale *Peter Pan* and Victor Hugo’s Quasimodo, from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. I will be examining the roles these texts have played in developing and perpetuating stereotypes for characters with a disability, as well as the association between the abnormal body and disability. I will also be examining a contemporary children’s text that seeks to create an authentic character with a disability, Disney’s *Finding Nemo* (Preston 56).

The misrepresentation of disability through characters such as Captain Hook and Quasimodo can fall into three categories; the disabled as the villain, the disabled as inherently innocent and the disabled as inspirational (Crow 1). Captain Hook falls under the role of the villain, as he has been punished with a disability for his antisocial behaviours. When we examine the social implications that such a stereotype can reproduce, it is fair to say that in this instance, physical disability has been grossly misrepresented (Crow 1). An ‘iron claw’ has grotesquely replaced Captain Hook’s hand after a run in with the protagonist, Peter Pan, where his hand has been fed to a crocodile (Barrie 36). The transformation of Captain Hook’s body to accommodate this amputation challenges the societal norms of aesthetics and the way we view the body (Whittington-Walsh 698). This now serves as his central and defining characteristic, with even his name reflecting this disability. When we first meet Captain Hook within the text of *Peter Pan*, Peter Pan first describes him as “the worst of them all [pirates]” before moving to the description of his hook, painting a violent images of Captain Hook’s “iron claw instead of a right hand” which “he claws with” (Barrie 36). It is reinforced numerous times that Captain Hook’s most defining characteristic is the hook itself, as our first description of his
appearance ends with “undoubtedly the grimmest part of him was his iron claw” (Barrie 42). Captain Hook shares the trait of a physical disability with a range of other villains, as a missing limb has worked its way into the stereotype of a pirate in general, creating an automatic link between the villain and the disabled. If we return to Butler here, the character of the villainous pirate with a hook for a hand is an example of iterability where a recognisable and repeated form has a (in this instance, villainous) performativity attached to it (204). Captain Hook appears to be unable to act as a productive member of society as his body does not meet the norm.

Captain Hook is constantly seeking revenge for the misfortune that has befallen him (his physical disability) at the hands of Peter Pan. If we briefly expand our gaze here to include other examples of physical disabilities inspiring vengeance against the world; such as in Batman, in the form of ‘Two Face’ and in James Bond, Dr. No, we view a further perpetuation of the disabled villain (Hartnett 21). The villain becomes the personification of evil, based on their need to take out their frustrations for their lot in life on the able-bodied protagonist. Ironically, in Peter Pan, Hook begins to grow fond of his disability, and resents the act of having his hand fed to a crocodile more than having to replace his hand with a hook. Hook states that “if I were a mother I would pray to have my children born with this instead of that” referring to his hook over his hand (Barrie 46). I believe that this establishes and projects the idea that only a character that is already living outside the world of social acceptance would enjoy this deformity. Just as when a protagonist has a disability it is their job to overcome it and inspire others, it is the
disabled antagonist’s job to show contempt for the world that has cast this misfortune upon them. The villain becomes a canvas upon where all negative attributes of the human experience can be projected (Hartnett 21).

The character of Quasimodo is an interesting example of disability as inspirational and innocent; though still possessing slight degrees of villainy. Quasimodo struggles to overcome adversity and fit into a society where his talents on the church bells are overlooked by his physical appearance (Whittington-Walsh 699). Hugo himself states “we will not try to give the reader any idea of the tetrahedron-like nose, of that horseshoe shaped mouth; of the small left eye overhung by a bushy red eyebrow, while the right was completely hidden by a monstrous wart” (47). While being publically shamed when announced ‘Pope of Fools’ we receive our first description of Quasimodo’s appearance, which continues over three pages and is summed up with the statement “he looked like a giant broken to pieces and badly cemented together” (Hugo 48). He is taunted and humiliated by the crowd, who accuse him of witchcraft and criminal activity before he is placed on a throne and paraded through the streets, conveying a message to the reader that to have a body that does not conform to the norm will bring the ridicule of your community. This particular scene from the novel exposes a time where disability was treated in a very different manner; where it is not only misrepresented but also mocked and feared. The supernatural approach is apparent through the comments of those attending the Festival of Fools, as well as a clear link between the disabled and the villain through the lines “Once he left a broomstick on my leads; oh what a disagreeable hunchback’s face he has; oh the villainous creature” (Hugo 49). His
physical appearance once again becomes central in this characterisation and the very title, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, causes the audience to immediately focus on this physical deformity rather than his talents and dehumanises the character of Quasimodo.

Quasimodo is often displayed as being kind hearted, saving the gypsy La Esmeralda from execution and providing her with sanctuary within his cathedral. Throughout this section of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, La Esmeralda still struggles to push past the physical appearance of Quasimodo, despite the noble deed he performed in saving her life. When she is threatened again, and upon her death, Quasimodo reverts to an animalistic state that is somewhat villainous, where he becomes mad with rage and cannot control his feelings. This leads to many deaths at his hands as he becomes unable to control his violent urges (Whittington-Walsh 704). The animalistic representation of disability is not uncommon and stems from an understanding of disability that is now out-dated, yet still underlying in our society.

Characters with a disability are often portrayed as holding animalistic traits, and this is explored through the character of Quasimodo, often through vivid descriptions, portraying him with animalistic traits; “gnashing his teeth like an enraged bear”, “licking his tusks, growling like a wild beast” (Hugo 69-70). Able-bodied members of society are seen to be removed from the natural environment, having progressed to a more civilised state of mind. As the able-bodied hold a binary relationship with the disabled body, the disabled are therefore uncivilised in their actions (Hughes 24). This area that excuses for the disabled from acting in a
civilised manner is referred to as the ‘zone of exception’, and is described by Bill Hughes as a somewhat repulsive area between animal and humanity. This is an area which society does not like to acknowledge exists, where humans act based on pure emotional response as opposed to weighing up the logical outcomes and proceeding accordingly. Quasimodo does not fit into any aspect of society because of the physical appearance of his body and is therefore allowed access to this zone of exception when experiencing an extreme emotional response.

With the characters of both Captain Hook and Quasimodo, their physical disabilities have become all consuming. There has been no significant exploration of their personal contextual backgrounds. The disabilities consume every aspect of these characters from their names to their actions and the way in which they interact with the world. The authors do not take the sociocultural backgrounds of these characters into consideration, failing to portray them as “whole people with varied lifestyles and personalities” (Crow 1). The characters fail to effectively and meaningfully convey the complexity of the society we live in (Ayala 106; Longmore 363; Shakespeare 286; Whittington-Walsh 697).

Another example of children’s literature where disability is represented in a manner that seeks to redefine the norm is Disney’s Finding Nemo. Preston in particular explores the effective representation of Nemo within this film, and while there are still areas that are too ‘inspirational’ to give an authentic representation of disability, it is a step in the right direction. There is a great move within this film to promote inclusion and acceptance of disability, and the protagonist, Nemo, is a
great advocate for this.

Within *Finding Nemo*, Nemo, the protagonist, has a ‘lucky fin’ that has not fully developed after his birth, and he therefore fails to meet the normal expectations of the body. It is considerably smaller than his other side fin and his father is often making excuses on his behalf about what he can and cannot accomplish because of this disability (Preston 57). The first example of positive inclusion and representation of disability within this film occurs during Nemo’s first day at school. His father once again disables Nemo through not allowing him to participate in all aspects of school because of his fin. Nemo’s newfound friends embrace this difference and go on to share their own subtle disabilities in order to normalise Nemo in this environment. This acceptance of the difference in physical appearance begins to expand our understanding and acceptance of the norm. Once he has meet Gill, an angle fish who also suffers a damaged fin, Nemo becomes inspired to overcome all boundaries. While this provides a lovely sentiment, it does conform to the stereotype of an inspirational characters am proposing we move away from in the representation of disabilities.

Perhaps one aspect that does make *Finding Nemo* so successful is the conversion of its characters to animals. This immediately removes the need to include complex personal contexts, such as cultural and religious diversity, and allows us to more readily accept a varied representation of the body, as we do not need to identify personally with a fish. Anthropomorphising the protagonist of children’s literature is not an uncommon practice and provides the author an opportunity to escape the
pressures of an ethnically diverse character line up (Ayala 111). There are quite a high number of characters who have a disability in Finding Nemo and include conditions from memory loss and Obsessive Compulsive Disorders to split personalities and physical disabilities. While the inclusivity of disability in this film is taking great steps in redefining ‘the norm’, when comparing the animalistic traits displayed by Quasimodo in The Hunchback of Notre Dame with the anthropomorphising of characters seen in Finding Nemo, I can’t help but wonder if this practice is in fact perpetuates the idea of the disabled displaying animalistic traits, on a subconscious level.

I believe that from this anthropomorphizing we have a tendency to overlook the disability all together, as we literally see the disabled as an animal and therefore the issues immediately lose a degree of connectedness with the ‘real world’. Or perhaps it is that this disability is so well encompassed into the narrative that Nemo is in fact challenging and reshaping the stereotypical protagonist in children’s literature. Unfortunately, I do not truly believe this is the case, and while Finding Nemo certainly does challenge these boundaries, it does so within the safe confines of western discourses, being a male dominated film, and through anthropomorphising the characters the issues associated with diversity of culture, race or body become lost.

The inclusion of disability as a narrative device is not an uncommon theme in children’s literature. Captain Hook’s disability is used as a catalyst for his obsession with defeating Peter Pan, the character responsible for his deformity. Quasimodo’s
disabilities allow him to act in a manner that is not socially acceptable, such as murder, or as a catalyst for his interactions with La Esmeralda after she provides him with water while in the stocks. Nemo’s ‘lucky fin’ is an inspirational device used to show children that you can overcome anything, and to prove that to not only himself, but to his father as well. While we are aiming to include disabilities within children’s literature, the need to portray them in an authentic manner will need to gain priority, with a focus on their impact on plot playing a much smaller role.

While many examples of children’s literature explore disability in a superficial way conforming tightly to these three stereotypes, The Black Book of Colours, by Menena Cottin and Two Mates, by Melanie Prewett, do make some ground in presenting a realistic portrayal of a character with a disability. These contemporary and culturally diverse examples of children’s literature have moved away from the grotesque representation of disability (such as that of Quasimodo) and no longer view it as a punishment (as is the case with Captain Hook). This has created a far more authentic experience in terms of how and why disability exists within society, yet the characters still remain confined by the restraints of a dominant able-bodied discourse and the inspirational stereotypes that come with centuries of misrepresentation.

Cottin’s The Black Book of Colour provides us with an insight into the world of blindness. This book aims to have an educational and empathetic quality, which is ideal in the inclusion of disability in children’s literature (Ayala 103). Each page has not only the written language, but also the text translated into braille by Elisa Amado,
making it accessible for both the blind and the sighted. The book is entirely black, with white writing, contrasting the words on the page, which explores the associations with colours made by those who cannot see them. While this book makes some great steps towards extending the normative boundaries to include a diverse range of protagonists, there are some areas that remain confined by the expectation of how a disability is performed or enacted and hence understood.

Menena Cottin originally studied graphic design and illustration in Venezuela before she began writing books. She currently lives in Caracas and initially wrote *The Black Book of Colours* in Spanish, but any Spanish cultural connotations are not apparent in the English translation. Cottin’s graphic design background has served as inspiration to the exploration of colours by a voice that cannot experience this sense.

This is a picture book that subverts the traditional idea of a picture book as it contains no colour whatsoever. It is a book with a black cover and pages contrasting with white writing that creates a nice link between the visual appearance of the book and its title. The pages on the left hand side of the book contain written word, which appears in white, as well as braille at the top of the page in black, matching the page. There is a braille alphabet at the back of the book for children to refer to if they wish. The interaction of the child with the text through their fingertips does not stop there, with pictures on the right hand page throughout the book appearing as raised objects that are also in black. The pictures on the pages are raised, giving a textured feel and allowing “us to see the world
through our fingertips” (Hughes 45). The images are glossy so that they stand out but are still black, allowing them to blend in with the page. This creates somewhat of a twilight zone, whether neither the sighted nor the blind can interact with the picture book in the manner that they would usually use.

The protagonist of this book is a young boy named Thomas. Thomas is referred to in third person, creating the implication that Thomas has been asked to describe colours by a third person who is transferring these ideas onto the pages in the book. We find that each of the descriptions so succinctly worded by ‘Thomas’ are in fact the result of Cottin’s imaginative digital design background, and is another example of an adult attempting to represent the voice of the child (Rose 2). She gained inspiration for this children’s book when starring at a blank page and wondering what it would be like to not interact with the world in a visual manner (quoted on the final page of the book). This thought has lead to the construction of a fictional blind child, whose ideas about how the blind perceives the world are completely based on assumptions made by a sighted person. In imagining disability, Cottin has unknowingly othered the blind throughout her picture book as her representation of the associations and connections they make with the world stem from a sighted purpose.

The first and most problematic aspect of this book is the very nature of the disability it explores. There are many ways to experience blindness and each person’s experience of blindness can differ greatly from the next. This can be impacted by the ability to see shades and shadows, shapes and lines as well as if
they were born with blindness or attained it later in life (Hughes 45). Without having this information about Thomas, we are left wondering if these vivid descriptions of how colour is presented through his other senses are a result of his memories from before his blindness, or a construction of his world through the experiences of the blind (Hughes 45). All the reader really knows about Thomas is that he is blind.

This book explores the way a child interacts with the world with their senses and takes this idea one step further by providing colour representations with sound, touch, smell and taste. There are some areas around this idea that appear quite problematic when authentically representing the experience of a child that is visually impaired. “When the sun peeks through the falling water, all the colours come out, and that’s a rainbow.” This is a purely visual experience that is being described and at times undermines the point of the book, that our other senses, such as taste and touch, can be employed when sight can’t. While this line lends itself more towards the able-bodied child reader, I like the picture on the adjoining page as it is not a rainbow, but rather a mix of all the things that represent colour to Thomas so far, e.g. feathers (yellow), strawberries (red and grass clippings (green). This representation of colour, without using colour and instead emphasising touch and feel, is a powerful subversion of traditional notions of a rainbow.

The next page looks at water without the sun (no longer creating a rainbow) and Thomas thinks that it “doesn’t amount to much. It has no colour, no taste, no smell.” Thomas has decided that because water has no distinctive features to his
other senses that he also does not associate it with a colour. It must be assumed here that Thomas is referring to drinking water, for water in a pool, beach or river appeals to our sense of touch through its wetness, as well as the differing taste and smells depending on what type of water body you are near. The text manages to challenge notions of the disabled (child’s) body because Thomas is not physically depicted in the text, yet at the same time, the only information we have about his body is that he is blind.

“Thomas likes all colours because he can hear them and smell them and touch them and taste them” (Cottin back cover blurb). This final page in the book ties together the manner that Thomas interacts with colours in his life. At no stage within this book is Thomas said to have some form of visual impairment. The use of braille and the way that colour is described by Thomas is what indicates to the audience that Thomas has a visual impairment. This treatment of his disability is positive in developing characters that have a disability within children’s literature as normal, yet the book is also in a way completely focussed on his disability as an all defining aspect of his personality.

“But black is the king of colours” (Cottin final page). With this the reader is invited to assume the child is referring to their blindness and the lack of colour that they actually interact with. This is subverted as we discover that the colour black actually represents his mother’s hair to Thomas. The use of the term ‘king’ when describing the colour here is interesting as it is used to describe the quality of a female. This reflects a male dominant society, where the male term is seen as
holding more power than the female term.

This idea leads to further questions about who this book is actually aimed at. The association with colour is one purely reliant on the sense of sight, with this being the one aspect that those with sight disabilities are not familiar with. Those who are blind would perceive colour differently and any colour associations that are made can be made only by descriptions of a sighted person, therefore failing to reflect any of the disability. Depending on the degree of blindness a child has, they may in fact find a number of these pages inaccessible, as once again colour to object association holds little to no significance.

The character of Thomas, while moving towards extending the parameters of a normal protagonist, is not represented as a fully developed character with a diverse and unique personal context. While within The Black Book of Colours the term ‘blind’ is never actually used, Thomas’ blindness becomes all consuming and we are given no information about his socio-cultural context (Hughes 44). In failing to develop Thomas as a character, Cottin does not break free of the innocently disabled stereotype that has developed.

While there are a number of areas that The Black Book of Colours are lacking in when developing the character of Thomas, there can be no doubt that this book does bring together both the sighted and the blind in one unique example of children’s literature. The fact that it is a book that focuses further on educating and creating an empathic environment for the sighted child is not a negative thing. Cottin has successfully avoided conforming to the villain, the inspirational and
The representation of disability more as a child than as a child with a disability.

Prewett and Prewett’s *Two Mates* is another example of children’s literature that explores the way a person with a disability interacts within society. Unlike *The Black Book of Colours*, the focal disability is not addressed until the final page of the book and even then it is revealed only in the illustration. We follow two young boys through their daily adventures, watching them hike, swim and fish against the Australian landscape. The final page of the book shows that one of these two boys is in fact in a wheelchair, causing a sudden realisation of the amazing feat that some of the tasks described in the book would have been.

This book is written by Melanie Prewett and illustrated by Maggie Prewett. Jack, the main character of the book is Melanie’s son and Maggie’s grandson. ‘Jack’ narrates this entire book through the voice of Melanie, his mother, immediately disempowering the disabled child’s voice within this book, which is not heard at all. The illustrations within this book play an integral part of the story, as this is where the ‘hints’ are located as to Raf’s ‘real identity’.

This book is set out in a traditional picture book fashion, where there is a strong use of vibrantly coloured images to compliment the written narrative. In this particular picture book, the pictures in a way provide us with much more significant information than that of the written text, as it is here that Raf is constantly depicted as seated, so we do not learn his ‘secret’ and finally it is through these illustrations that we learn he is in fact in a wheelchair. The illustrations within this book also provide us with information about the personal contexts of the two boys, in
particular that Jack is Aboriginal. There are a number of pages that depict the iconic red desert landscape that we associate with remote communities such as Broome, as well as the inclusion of a variety of native Australian fauna and flora, such as goannas and gumnuts.

Australian literature has experienced the same plights of most westernised, post-colonial countries where there is a struggle between the coloniser and the colonised to be heard. Within Australia, this has been the case with Aboriginal literature with both traditional and contemporary styles. This book is published by the Aboriginal publishing house ‘Magabala Books’, which has created a space for Aboriginal voices in literature to be heard, and constructs Aboriginality as part of the ‘norm’ – it is not an issue, an obvious identity trait or something to be defined for the white child reader.

After the final page of the narrative, there is a double page spread of photos of the two boys as well as some photographs of them with their families. Of these nine pictures, there are still only two pictures that depict Raf in his wheelchair, once again attempting to take the focus away from his disability. While this may be viewed as positive that his disability is not the obvious focus of the story, there is no attempt to challenge the expectations of what the body should look like or the way it should function in a book that could be perfectly posed to do this.

This book serves as a form of inspirational material, where we learn to overcome adversities based on the daily triumphs of this young boy. In failing to fully address the wheelchair bound character, we are only furthering to other the disabled and
rob them of not only their voice, but of this significant aspect of their personality (Ayala 111; Crow 1; Shakespeare 285). While the disability should not become the single central theme of the novel and the character, it is a vital aspect of any character, and should therefore be given weighting in the character development throughout the story.

The educational aspect of this novel is quite obvious, and attempts to normalise spinal bifida and wheelchair bound children, through educating the abled bodied child so they can learn to accept these differences. While this is in no way a negative sentiment, it does perpetuate negative disability stereotypes in the sense that to try and depict Raf as ‘normal’ his wheelchair is removed from the story until the end. This reinforces notions about the ‘abled-body’ and the ‘disabled-body’ by implying that Raf needs to appear as having a normal body for the reader to identify with him. The child reading this book is not confronted with the disability as a part of Raf’s personality initially, meaning that they are able to bond with the character before discovering his ‘secret’ which ultimately distorts the way this protagonist is identified with by other children. In this manner this novel is written not to allow a child with a disability to find a character they are able to identify with or to confront what is considered normal for a child. This book instead allows the reader to identify with the character first with an able-bodied normative framework and accept their disability later.

The final page of this book contains a short letter from Raf’s mother Kim. In this letter Kim initially moves towards encouraging children to accept Raf, and other
wheelchair bound children, for their differences for while they may need to have extensive visits to medical facilities, they also “go to the beach... [and] play Wii and Lego”. The final statement that is made by Kim is for children to see the person, not the wheelchair and what they can rather than what they can’t do. While these are ultimately good messages of acceptance, they do lend themselves to a somewhat inspirational view of children with a disability and we are once again seeing an able bodied adult speak on behalf of Raf, who is the one experiencing this disability.

Next to Kim’s section there is a white text box, which contains information about spinal bifida. This educational aspect of the book is beneficial for young children who may have questions about why Raf is in a wheelchair, and while it does educate the children, it does not necessarily encourage acceptance. The voice heard throughout this story is that of Prewett, through the cover of Jack. Raf as a character lacks a development and a voice in general throughout this novel and is not the central character, despite the fact that this is a book focussing on encouraging acceptance of children in wheelchairs. This is once again a book that is designed for the able-bodied child, rather than for a child with a disability to read and serves both an educational and inspirational purpose.

In contrast with The Black Book of Colours, Two Mates explores the sociocultural background of its characters in an extremely effective manner, in particular the Aboriginality of the narrating voice, Jack. Jack’s cultural identity is woven throughout the story in a subtle manner through inclusion of traditional terms for wildlife to the colour palate and illustrations on the pages. It can be said that Jack’s
cultural background is in fact much better presented than Raf’s disability. Unlike Raf’s disability that is hidden from the audience until the final page, Jack’s cultural background forms a part of the narrative itself, playing a part of his character development without becoming his defining feature. Had Raf’s disability been treated in this manner, Two Mates would have played a much greater part in expanding the way which disability is normalized through the rejection of stereotypes, such as the inspirational. By failing to represent disability as an important part of Raf’s character, the Two Mates is unable to fully break subvert the expectations of protagonists within children’s literature. By subverting the norm in the representation of our characters in children’s literature, over time we will be able to establish an opening for diverse representation of characters within children’s literature, aiding in the reestablishment of identity and ultimately move towards greater acceptance of the body in all its states.

The inclusion of diversity in characters is highlighted by numerous scholars from a range of disciplines that examine the portrayal of a minority group within society. Within literature, we engage when we find a character we can identify and relate to. This may not mean a character that shares our skin colour or religion, but extends further and encompasses the interested, hobbies and actions of the characters within the book (Pinsent 24). This only goes to further enforce the idea that these diversities must also be further developed should the author wish to engage, educate and create an empathetic and accepting mindset for the child through literature.
The treatment of the disabled as a minority underclass is one which is extremely outdated and needs to be addressed. Disability transgresses all aspects of society and should therefore have a strong focus within the academic world, as it is a field that crosses all sociocultural aspects of society. Despite the best efforts of many scholars, disability is far too broad and complex a term to become encompassed under already existing frameworks, and its representation in children’s literature, or literature in general cannot be effectively examined under any existing theoretical lens.

Currently, there is no theory specifically designed for examining the appropriate and effective representation of disability within literature, or the creation of the body within society (Ayala 113; Crow 2; Preston56; Shakespeare 298). Many scholars rely heavily on a feminist perspective, paralleling the failure of many texts to either embrace the misrepresentation of women, or, in this case, those with a disability. Stereotypes run rampant in the representation of both the woman and characters with a disability and there is a distinct lack of cultural diversity in children’s literature for both female characters and those with a disability. As the two minority groups can easily cross over by having a character that is both a woman and disabled, there are still a number of areas that become very problematic when applying a feminist lens. Furthermore, disability is not a group that is gender driven, nor does it hold such a concrete definition as that of the male and female genders. This demonstrates a field that has developed a need for a lens that examines the inclusion of diversity amongst all characters opposed to the effective application of feminist theory to that of disability studies. While there are
a multitude of issues that are shared between the two fields, using a feminist lens to examine these texts still leaves a lot of unanswered questions.

Foucauldian theory is another interesting, yet still somewhat problematic, framework that can be applied to Disability Studies, and in turn, can be used to examine the representation of disability in children’s literature. The application of Foucault’s principles on power, knowledge, normalisation and their impact on the development of ‘the body’ are particularly useful when examining this topic. In Barry Allen’s examination of Foucault, he spends some time examining what purpose the creation of ‘the norm’ has on society and disability studies. Names do not hold with them one solid meaning but rather a series of descriptions and ideas associated with a particular object or concept. This lends itself nicely to the application power and normalization within children’s literature, but still falls short. While it addresses the creation and the implication of the term ‘disabled’, it fails to incorporate the specific areas that should be a focus in children’s literature; to strive towards creating acceptance through breaking down the ideas and descriptions we associate with a normal human, and work on rebuilding these encompassing those with a disability.

Allen goes further in Foucault’s exploration of normalisation as to deconstruct the idea of medical advancements that ‘cure’ disability. He questions whether these advancements which are designed to liberate those with a disability are in fact constricting, as we are not allowing disability to become an acceptable norm, but rather ‘fixing it’ to meet societies understanding of how the human body should
function. You often hear the phase ‘better quality of life’ being used in situations such as this, whether it is referring to a cochlear implant or a new medication that helps reduce the affects of behavioural disabilities. While I am in no way condemning these scientific breakthroughs, I do find this concept extremely interesting. In ‘curing’ a person from their disability are we not only taking away their disability, but a major part of their personality in the process? There is no doubt that in this aspect Allen’s interpretation and application of Foucault could be an extremely useful and versatile tool when examining the representation of disability within our society. That being said, normalisation is only one aspect, although a significant one, of the effective representation of disability in children’s literature. Where feminist perspectives hold a strong focus on a diverse inclusion of characters, Allen’s interpretation of Foucault only examines the need for inclusion to promote acceptance, and overlooks significant aspects such as culture, religion and gender.

One of the major flaws in representing disability in children’s literature from a theoretical point of view is the lack of understanding of disability by both the authors and those who analyse children’s literature. Johnson in particular shows some very superficial understandings of disability, through his analysis of children’s literature in ‘Physical and Emotional Issues in Children’s Literature’. Johnson explored the concept of disability in children’s literature and does suggest that it is a great way to expose abled bodied children to the world of disability but fails to examine this concept further, demonstrating a superficial understanding of the issue at hand. Johnson examines the representation of disability in a variety of
children’s books, but worryingly suggests that “children would be able to sympathise with (disability)” through reading these books. Sympathy is not and should not be a focal point of disability in children’s literature. As I have previously stated, children’s literature should focus on disassembling the very notion of disability and foster not only acceptance but normality in this aspect as well. Education on the proper inclusion of not only disability but on a diverse range of minority groups would provide a far greater degree of benefit for those interacting with texts that address these issues than the misshapen application of another theory or frame.

I believe that any model that is developed that adequately considers all aspects of this complex issue would also be too complex to implement on a practical level. I believe that at this point in time, focusing on the diversity of characters in all texts will be the most effective way to avoid continuing stereotypes and the misrepresentations of disability and all minority groups within children’s literature. When examining any piece of children’s literature there should be a broad focus on characters from different cultural backgrounds, genders, sexualities, religious and socioeconomic statuses as well as a variety of disabilities presented. These should all coexist and none should form the focus of the narrative. There should be a subtle exploration of all of these aspects from all of the characters, creating an environment where diversity is ever present, yet never sensationalised.

The commodification of childhood is an essential aspect of the production of children’s literature. Unfortunately, disability is often included in children’s
literature for didactic purposes, to act as a plot twist or ‘drawing card’, so that a different experience will attract the child to the book. Additionally, we also have the inclusion of disability as a tool for a moral teaching of tolerance, indicating that often the reader these books are directed towards are in fact the able-bodied child. This is not a negative thing, yet does not always allow for an authentic experience with the child and therefore this method of representation does not allow for characters to develop for the children with disabilities to identify and connect with. On occasions this approach can be even more detrimental to the representation of disability, as these reoccurring stereotypes create a sympathetic reaction from the able-bodied child towards a child with a disability.

The biggest obstacle that we will face in authentically representing disability in children’s literature will be in overcoming the voicelessness of the two bodies we are attempting to represent, that is the child and the disabled. The very nature of childhood implies, as I have previously explored, the disconnection from the adult world that is responsible for the publication of literature. It is only through the adult passing knowledge onto the child that the child is even able to interact with this literature (being taught to read). There will always be adult voices involved in the production of literary representations of the child, therefore, these representations need to use notions of ‘the body’ that move past able-bodied normative categorisations.

Those with a mental disability, or even one that is physical, such as blindness, may be inherently unable to interact with society in a manner that allows them to create
their own voice, even so, this voice can only be created if the able-bodied allows a space for it. The vast amount of people who can fit under the ‘disabled’ classification only provides further difficulties in being able to represent disability in children’s literature, as it is quite likely that no two people experience a disability in the same manner. In acknowledging this, we must also acknowledge that there is no universal voice that speaks on behalf of all those with a disability and try to capture this in the medium of a picture book would be quite impossible.

In order to truly represent disability within children’s literature, there needs to be a societal change of approach. We need to collectively unpack all the preconceived ideas and stereotypes that have been created about ‘the body’ and redirect them towards a more expansive, accepting environment. The inclusion of disability in children’s literature should not be just to educate. It should serve to normalize the abnormal and in turn able the disable. The current representations of disability in children’s literature, on the whole, are empowering for a child with a disability who is unable to identify with characters who share similar lifestyles, complications and social situations as themselves. As 20% of the population will be diagnosed with a disability (a number that is only rising) shouldn’t characters with a disability in turn make up one fifth of the characters we are engaging with in literature of all varieties? In failing to push these expectations of characters in children’s literature, it is only further isolating and disabling them. There should be an even distribution of disabled characters throughout a range of literature for disability to truly become treated as the norm.
It is time that the stories children read and hear include experiences of those with a disability in a manner that acknowledges diverse perspectives and not stereotypical purposes. To quote Tom Shakespeare, “Surely, the representation and exploration of human experience is incomplete as long as disability is either missing from, or misrepresented” (286).
Works Cited


