abstract

Children's authors have not traditionally developed characters with disabilities to include a multiplicity of traits, crafting instead static, uni-dimensional portrayals. While books with depictions of characters with identified exceptionalities have appeared on bookstore shelves and awards' lists, these characters have generally been relegated to subsidiary positions, assisting other main characters in their growth and development without demonstrating parallel learning. Two Canadian authors discuss their conceptualization of characters with special needs, exploring personal narratives which have informed their work and concluding that children require book collections which explore multi-levelled characters, encouraging readers to discover real life heroes within and among themselves.

Biography

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Creating Characters with Diversity in Mind: Two Canadian Authors Discuss Social Constructs of Disability in Literature for Children

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Jean Little, a recipient of an Order of Canada for her outstanding contributions to the field of Canadian children's literature, has had particular experiences that inspired her early

writing and that have continued to support her depiction of characters with special needs. Early in her teaching career, she found herself working in the field of special education and sought books which fairly represented her students with physical disabilities. She also had interests related to her own visual impairment and had noted that protagonists did not portray this challenge (Little, 1987). "Remembering how I had never found a cross-eyed heroine in a book, I decided to search for books about children with motor handicaps. I did not for one moment intend to limit my students to reading about crippled kids. I knew that they completely identified with Anne Shirley and Homer Price, that they actually became Bambi, Piglet and Wilbur. I did not think they needed a book to help them adjust. I did believe, however, that crippled children had a right to find themselves represented in fiction" (p. 223-224).

Little's hunt for books that had realistic depictions of people with special needs was unsuccessful, a parallel to my own experiences as a special education consultant working on an advisory committee and seeking titles to include in a revision of Saskatchewan's English Language Arts curriculum for grades seven to nine. The question I was asking—"Why don't we have many appropriate fictional texts about characters who have disabilities?" is a question Jean asked decades ago. At that time, she found books that portrayed children with disabilities who completely recovered before the book ended. Yet none of her students was "ever going to recover completely" (Little, 1987, p. 224). She could not locate alternatives—books that had a happy ending without a miracle cure, or books where the character's disability was present only in the background. "Somebody should write one," she thought. A few years later, that somebody

would turn out to be her, with *Mine for Keeps*, the story of a girl named Sally Copeland who has cerebral palsy and, like Little herself at the time, a West Highland white terrier called Susie.

My own experiences exploring what I define as a social justice issue—this lack of depictions of disability in children's fiction—evolved as I was engaged in the curriculum revision project. At that time, I noted that even when characters with disabilities were included in children's fiction, they seemed rarely to occupy the position of protagonist. As I crafted an early draft of my young adult novel, *Wild Orchid*, which would be published in 2005 by Red Deer Press, I was nudged into considering the development of a protagonist with special needs. As I did so, I suddenly realized that the character of Taylor Jane, already demonstrating a distinct quirkiness, was reflecting qualities I recognized on the spectrum of Asperger's Syndrome. Such a character might fill what I perceived to be a gap in available materials, while at the same time solidifying a characterization with which I had been struggling.

As soon as I began to consider Taylor Jane as a young woman with autism, the writing, and, most specifically, her first-person voice in the novel, accelerated. This choice in characterization drove the narrative in ways I could not initially have predicted, and made the book far more complex because of its combination of unique and universal themes. This relates to what Davis (2006) identifies as "the richness of experience and creativity offered by the opportunity of disability" (p. xviii).

After reading Jean Little's autobiographical work and noting the connections we had in terms of our writing, I began to correspond with her by email in the fall of 2008. What initially began as fan mail on my part evolved into a landscape on which I could talk about the issues I

had begun to explore in my doctoral studies at the University of Alberta. Soon, Jean and I were engaged in conversations about what we identified as stereotypical social constructions of characters with disabilities in traditional children's fiction.

Thomson (1997) reframes "disability" as another cultural construction of bodies and identity alongside race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality, and discusses how literary texts have stripped these characters of normalizing contexts, stigmatizing them with a single trait. Disability, according to Mitchell and Snyder (2000), seems to entail a kind of notoriety—the character dominates the work for the author's own purposes. These purposes in traditional children's fiction have typically included an emphasis of triumph over adversity or a focus on the tragic victim (Sherry, 2008). Such purposes in texts do not serve to open spaces for diversity in classrooms nor do they encourage explorations of self and others through what Galda (1998) calls, "mirrors and windows" (p. 1).

When asked about her own depiction of characters with special needs, Little was frank (personal communication, September, 2008): "When I began to write, I was conscious that I wanted to write sometimes of children with disabilities like myself. I knew that I identified with characters in books I read and never thought they were different from me because I felt everything they did. Heidi and Anne Shirley were not disabled but they were like me. I thought it might work the other way around. If I wrote stories about handicapped children, other kids would discover that, although they themselves had no disability, they were the same kind of being as the kids in my stories." This sentiment reflects Galda's (1998) conceptualization of

books as windows and mirrors, encouraging a reading journey that explores self and other through a text's characters.

I confided to Jean that when I was in the middle of writing *Wild Orchid*, I began to worry that I might not be "getting the autism right." What if my colleagues in the field of special education thought I really didn't know much about kids with special needs? Even more important, would young readers with Asperger's Syndrome find my portrayal accurate and respectful? Working on a character who had traits rarely seen in fiction opened me to the possibility of criticism, something I had not been much concerned with in my previous writing. Following an early draft of the Taylor character, I embarked upon extensive research, attending a workshop provided by Dr. Tony Atwood, an internationally respected expert on Asperger's syndrome, and reading books and articles on the topic. I asked Jean if she herself had had similar worries within the context of her own work.

"When I was actually writing," she said, "this wish of mine (to show how characters with disabilities were like other kids) dropped away and I lived inside the story myself without thinking about readers at all. Did I ever feel nervous about writing about a specific handicap? Since I mostly wrote about disabilities with which I was well acquainted, this did not trouble me. I worried about Twig in *Willow and Twig* because there is considerable controversy about how deaf children should be raised and educated. I interviewed people, visited a couple of schools, read Oliver Sacks... But once I got started, Twig just arrived, fully himself. I did not, however, make him profoundly deaf and so avoided the question of whether he should learn to sign rather than lip read."

I mentioned to Jean a scene in *Willow and Twig* where crotchety old Aunt Con has fallen down the stairs and the children try their best to take care of her until the ambulance comes. Twig, with all his energy, comes barrelling in, sees his aunt on the ground, then carefully gets down beside her and feeds her a seedless green grape.

> "Ope, ope," he ordered, pressing it against Aunt Con's lips.
>
> When she opened her lips to speak, he popped the grape into her mouth, jumped up and ran away back to the kitchen.
>
> "Good," Aunt Con said and chewed. Before Willow could think what to do next, her little brother was back with a single potato chip.
>
> "Ope," he commanded.
>
> Aunt Con hastily swallowed what was left of the grape and opened her mouth obediently. In went the potato chip.
>
> (Little, 2000, pp. 177-178)

"Was this scene a real episode from your life, or did you make it up completely?" I asked Jean, marvelling at the way she had captured the essence of a very young child trying to help an adult in the best way he knew how.

"The scene was completely real," Jean answered. "We moved into that very house when my niece was two and on the first night, I fell down stairs, knocked myself out, and broke a small bone in my foot plus acquiring impressive bruises. Jeanie brought me water first, then a green grape, then a potato chip. Then she said she would read to me and she sat down on the floor and

began to read...*Chicken Little*! Rushing to tell the king the sky was falling . I lay there, and moaned, and laughed. ”

“It’s a difficult thing,” I mused, “trying to create a character whose challenges make life difficult for himself and others, while at the same time creating situations where the character’s gifts shine through. In your book, Twig’s family were often hard pressed to manage his difficult behaviour, yet they dearly loved him and saw the wonderful little boy behind that behaviour. I thought about this balance in my characterization of Billy, a boy with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder in *The Moon Children.* I tried to use Billy’s developing friendship with Natasha, a neighbour girl, to show Billy’s amazing heart, his wonderful capacity to offer love.”

Both Jean and I have had readers describe some of what we write as “issues books,” a term neither of us agrees with in the sense that we define such a book as a didactic attempt at teaching a lesson. In light of historical patterns suggesting narrow characterizations where characters with disabilities are concerned, it is easy to see why a reader might assume that a book was going to be an “issues” book simply because the protagonist has a disability.

The weight of an “issue” in a book became an interesting part of our airport discussion when we were able to meet, in person, during Jean’s author tour in Western Canada from her home in Guelph, Ontario. Honey, Jean’s seeing eye dog, lay on the floor of the boarding lounge between us, quiet at first, then beginning to whine as we became more and more animated over the topic of “issues books.” We hoped the dog was just sensing emotion in our voices, and not getting sick. Jean had been awakened in the night by the dog vomiting, and she’d felt some apprehension about the impending flight. But, during our airport conversation, Honey soon

relaxed and ate a leftover ham sandwich that Jean produced from her purse. Then Honey lay under Jean's chair, watchful, but quiet, her ears every now and then a flickering barometer that defined our emotional levels.

"How well do you think we're doing now in creating books for children which respect the diversity readers bring?" I asked Jean.

"There are many moving books which focus on kids with disabilities," Jean answered. "There are a lot of *issues* books which put the whole focus on the handicap of the character and laboriously explain what a marvellous kid he or she is. But there are lots of others such as Cynthia Voight's *Izzy Willy Nilly* which are rich and funny and moving and have lots to say...my favourite recent one is *the curious incident of the dog in the night time* by Mark Haddon...it is a best-seller about a kid with Asperger's Syndrome and it is a gem of a book."

"I had discussions about 'issues' books with an American agent interested in representing my work," I told Jean. "But although he initially accepted *The Moon Children*, which was my new manuscript at the time, he asked if all my books were "issues" books. I said that none of my books were 'issues' books. Our relationship broke down over this, and various other things. 'I think I was just fired by my own agent,' I told my husband one night. 'He can't fire you,' my husband said, helpfully.'You should just fire him.' So I did. But only after I was fired first."

What makes a book an *issues* book appears to be the imbalance given to a particular character trait, as in a book whose purpose is to educate about a particular disability compared to a text where a character's disability appears as one of many elements of that person. Full-fledged characters, like readers, have many diverse skills and challenges rather than one, all-

encompassing trait. This speaks to the importance of developing a base of classroom literature that respects the multiplicity of children's "stories to live by" (Orr, 2005), recognizing that school should become a forum in which the construction of textual knowledge is examined (Banks, 1996) rather than taken for granted.

Jean Little's work often focuses on a character finding strength from within, rather than a solution appearing from "outside." Sally in *Mine for Keeps* adapts to new situations after returning home from a special school. Tim in *Forward, Shakespeare!* learns to utilize the support of his guide dog and eventually returns to high school with dreams of further education. There are times, however, when help from outside is necessary, as proven by Twig's trial of hearing aids in *Willow and Twig* and his subsequent fluent speech development.

I wondered how many of Jean's characters are based on real life people. In her autobiography *Stars Come Out Within*, she says, about her students, "I did not yet know that they would never desert me, that one or more of them would sneak into every book I would someday write, that every one of my students was mine for keeps" (p. 13). At the urging of Little's younger sister Pat, who asked her to "write about how hard it is to be the sister of someone who is handicapped," Little's sequel to *Mine for Keeps* isn't about Sally, but her sibling Meg, under the title *Spring Begins in March*. From these early works, Little went on to earn an Order of Canada, four honorary university degrees, and to publish over forty books for young people, many of which contain characters with special needs. These characters, however, are fictional, connecting to Dillard's (1998) idea of how authors utilize, in their writing, their own interior lives —"those illusive, fragmentary patches of color and feeling" (p. 157). Jean reported that it

is the inspiration she takes from experience that assists with the conceptualization of her characters, rather than the characters appearing ready-made from real life.

After we made sure that Honey had been offered a trip outdoors, a rather difficult task that involved a service elevator and a locked hallway, Jean and I came back to the boarding lounge of the airport to await her next flight. Returning to our discussion about the ending of *The Moon* Children, our conversation was punctuated by Honey's intermittent and worried whines as Jean asked how I decided on my choice regarding a less-than-happy closure of one of the novel's plot lines.

"The ending was a challenge," I admitted. "Because of the age for whom *The Moon Children* was intended, I knew I wanted to write a happy ending. Yet I couldn't disrespect Billy's struggle by magically reproducing what occurs in so many earlier books: the moment when the invalid Clara walks in *Heidi*, or the "miracle cure" of Colin in *The Secret Garden*. In *The Moon Children*, I wanted to offer another kind of happy ending. I wanted to show readers like Pauline in Carter's *In the Clear*, a girl recovering from polio, that a number of different kinds of happy endings are possible, but it took me a while to figure out what that happy ending was for Billy. Eventually I came to terms with the fact that Billy might not win the contest, after all, something which some adult readers have criticized. I think children understand this decision, though. As part of his own learning and growth, Billy recognizes there are other things more important to him that he has, in fact, won. These are things tied to his particular strengths and gifts. If Billy had won the contest, I think it might have been disrespectful. Disrespectful of the struggle associated with his having an FASD."

Jean and I talked further about characterization, and the way we choose to develop characters with particular strengths. "In *Little By Little*," I asked Jean, " you discuss your experiences at Toronto's Jesse Ketchum school in a Sight Saving class, and say that "everyone, even the oldest boys and girls, felt useless compared to other children" (p. 73). Your teacher, Miss Bogart, had an idea: she would teach the class to weave baskets, which would be painted at the School for the Blind and returned in time to give as Christmas gifts. As an author, do you consciously give your characters who have special needs particular gifts...to counteract the possibility of them feeling this same uselessness?"

"I do not think I give my handicapped characters specific gifts to strengthen them. I meet them, as I write, and they have gifts just as their siblings and friends do," said Jean, referring again to the multiplicity of traits real people have within their storied lives.

Outside Jean Little's books, I wondered how other Canadian authors conceptualize the identities of their characters, and whether additional emphasis is placed on special strengths to try and "compensate" for a disability. I think of the nineteen books I have read for the pilot study of my dissertation, and how remarkable the characters with disabilities seem to be. As a group, they do tend towards exceptional giftedness— as artists, writers, storytellers, computer experts, and athletes. Are they more gifted than their typical counterparts in other books? This is a good question for further study.

When I asked Jean about the settings of her books, she smiled. "I use familiar settings in most books to keep myself from becoming confused," she said, confidingly. "I have placed books in all the houses in which I have lived and a couple belonging to friends. For one friend, I

moved her staircase in my book and she was so pleased. She did not like it where it was in her real-life house, but could not afford to have her house overhauled."

I laughed at this. "I use familiar settings, as well," I said. "I have a very bad sense of direction, and a limited visual memory; unless I actually know the house where my characters live, I constantly have them turning one way to the kitchen, and then, in a different paragraph, they go another direction...it's simpler just to set it in the known." The idea of utilizing familiar settings connects to how writers may present particular aspects of their real lives within the borders of characterization. Just as the floor plan of a character's house may be suspiciously familiar, so, too, echoes of real experiences may emerge in fiction. The influences that have informed an author's writing are complex and important if readers are to fully understand the writing in the context in which it was produced.

I wondered if Jean was conscious of any common patterns regarding characters with disabilities in the novels she encountered as a child. Researchers such as Lois Keith identify a "cure or kill" mentality which Keith (2001) says authors of 19th and early 20th century social novels utilize, using the character with a disability as a metaphor in the story rather than a "real person" with a multiplicity of traits.

"Did you notice these literary patterns when you were a teacher and writer, or possibly when you were a younger reader?" I asked.

"I noticed when I was a child," she responded. "All the handicapped children in books seemed to be cured at the end of the book, or else they died. A few remained saintly shadows. I did not find myself much of the time. Crossed eyes, however, were seen as comical or villainous,

which made me mad since I was taunted with the term "cross eyed" from the time I started going to public school. But, as I grew up, I came to see that the authors were reflecting the viewpoint of society as a whole. People believed that you could not be disabled and happy at the same time. I was so pleased when I came upon Rosemary Sutcliff's *Warrior Scarlet* in which the hero is realistically disabled, has heartache and failure because of this, and triumphs eventually but is still disabled at the finish."

I considered further what I knew of Jean Little's connection to Rosemary Sutcliffe from reading about it in one of her autobiographies. Little (1990) describes her surgery when, after unsuccessfully treating the glaucoma in her left eye, doctors removed it. She was sent home from hospital with a piece of perforated plastic in the socket, waiting a month to get the plastic eye. " 'I was grateful for this time alone. I did not want to see anyone. I rejected eye patches' " (p. 49) and " 'I was a wounded animal and I wanted to hide. I needed to be solitary, to explore the extent of my hurt in private. Except for Mother, I did not want to be with well people' " (p. 50). Jean's only solace at that time was books, and it wasn't until she read Sutcliff's *Outcast*, drinking it down the way a "traveller in the desert gulps down a long drink of lifesaving water" (p. 51), that she again felt part of her world and able to carry on.

In Little's second novel, which would be published under the title *Home from Far*, she reports using the story to express her gratitude to Sutcliffe for rescuing her from her "evening of the mind" (Little, 1990, p. 58). In *Home from Far* (Little, 1965), Jenny's father is a librarian. After his son's funeral, he reads Sutcliffe's novels aloud to his daughter, and as she shares the

heartbreak of the characters, her own heartache at the loss of her twin brother is eased and she begins to see the beauty in things again.

> One after another, he had read them aloud to her. And as Jenny shared the heartbreak and loneliness of Beric, Tamsyn, Drem and the rest, her own heartache was eased and she began to share in the beauty and the hope in the stories—the colors of flowers she had never seen, the spring weather, the love of animals, the inner light of kindness.
>
> (*Home from Far*, p. 60).

Jean Little's friendship with Rosemary Sutcliffe prompted her to confide to Sutcliffe, "Now that I've written a book about a crippled child...people keep urging me to write about a deaf kid or one with cystic fibrosis. I can't and I can't explain why not" (Little, 1990, p. 67). Sutcliffe advised her to wait until a book comes asking to be written, and she has used this as her guide over the years. There perhaps needs to be enough connections to an author's lived or imagined experiences for a book idea to ripen into actual text.

"In *Little By Little*," I continued in our airport chat, reaching down to stroke Honey's back, "you speak frankly about your experiences being bullied as a child. Can you comment on how this may have affected your writing?"

"By the time I wrote my second book, *Home from Far*, I wanted to show that the heroine of a story could also be a bully," Jean responded. "I knew this because I had bullied my younger sister. I find this rare and seldom is the main character both disabled and mean at times. But I think we are moving along in our approach to disability in literature."

"That is an important comment," I answered. In a similarly restrictive way, writers have tended to depict only a book's antagonists as being mean or unfair to characters with disabilities. Perhaps authors haven't felt free to develop realistic interactions because characters with special needs were created within such narrow parameters.

I thought more about restrictions placed upon particular fictional characters in relation to a conversation I had with one of my editors, who suggested that a secondary character in a particular draft of mine looked "too good to be true" in terms of his reactions to the character who had a disability. "Let's see him warts and all," said the editor, advising against treating the character with disability with "kid gloves." This was good advice.

Jean and I suddenly realized that boarding had already been concluded for her flight, and we raced to the entry point, hoping she was not too late. Maybe Honey had had a right to be nervous, after all!

"I think my main message," she called as she handed the attendant her boarding pass, "is telling children, whether they are disabled or not, that they are not alone. If they tell lies or are jealous or hate people in their families every so often, or if they run away from problems...they are not alone. I believe children often suffer from feeling they are abnormal and the 'only one.' I certainly did."

This message of Jean's connects back to Galda's (1998) ideas about mirrors and windows, and the hope that readers with and without disabilities will see themselves and others in Jean's characters. It also speaks to how readers become engaged in a character's world through opportunities for empathy and entrancement that become avenues for connectedness

with other people on landscapes outside the reading event. Reading thus becomes an integral part of community building, helping children respect and understand each other and themselves. The key is to encounter, through texts, characters developed with a multiplicity of traits, who, through the richness of their storied lives, remind us that we are in good company, that we are not journeying alone.

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