

Disabling Characters – Book Review

I highly recommend this book, written by Patricia A. Dunn, to everyone – it is useful for writers, readers, teachers, and anyone who is part of today's society! It looks at a range of books (YA novels and short stories), and analyses them in regard to their representation of disability. It is comprehensive, highly educational, and eye-opening – no matter how experienced or understanding you believe yourself to be.

I used this book for research for a uni assignment in which I decided to look at the need for more well represented inclusive literature, specifically including characters with congenital disabilities in fiction. This book was so interesting that I read it from cover to cover even after I had completed and handed in the assignment. It is now covered in pencil and highlighter pen because there was so much information that I wanted to take in.

One particular section that stood out to me (though so many did), was this:

Helping students “learn tolerance and exercise empathy” implies that there is something negative about persons with disabilities, something that must be “tolerated.” After all, people are never asked to “tolerate” people with positive characteristics. “Empathy” can also have negative connotations...seems to suggest that the students who are supposed to be developing this tolerance are people who do not have disabilities.”

The book raises the idea that disability is indeed a societal construct, explores how to challenge ableist assumptions, myths and stereotypes, and investigates representations in fiction that have been done well and not so well. It also

looks at how writers can improve this and how readers can understand and question books' messages better.

Goodreads' summary: *Disabling Characters provides detailed analyses of selected young adult (YA) novels and short stories. It looks at the relative agency of the disabled character, the behavior of the other characters, the environment in which the character must live, the assumptions that seem to be underlying certain scenes, and the extent to which the book challenges or perpetuates an unsatisfactory status quo. Class discussions about disability-themed literature, however well intentioned, have the potential to reinforce harmful myths or stereotypes about disability. In contrast, discussions informed by a critical disability studies perspective can help readers develop more sophisticated views of disability and contribute to a more just and inclusive society. The book examines discussion questions, lesson plans, study guides, and other supplemental materials aimed at students studying these texts, and it suggests more critical questions to pose about these texts and the positive and/or negative work they do, perhaps subliminally, in our culture. This book is a much-needed addition to college classes in YA literature, literary analysis, methods of teaching literature, disability studies, cultural studies, contemporary criticism, special education, and adolescent literacy.*