

Children's Literature Association Conference

San Antonio, Texas | June 28-30, 2018

Sessions attended:

1G. Images Refreshed

Everyday tasks and rising waters: Picture book portrayals of Mrs. Noah | Kathy Piehl, Minnesota State University, Mankato

Began with medieval mystery plays and then moved to 19th, 20th, and 21st century depictions of Mrs. Noah looking at whether she has a name (other than Mrs. Noah), has a voice, and has tasks to do (and type). Essentially, to what extent is she a fully-developed character and to what extent does she exhibit agency, questions which could be asked of an individual character or of a group of people.

"I've Always Wanted": Late Capitalism and an African American Girl in Don Freeman's *Corduroy* | Erica Kanesaka Kalnay, University of Wisconsin

1968 book published shortly after *A Snowy Day* has an African American girl who shares stage with title character. Story begins in a laundromat, follows a theatrical structure, and features both on- and off-stage spaces. Late capitalism ("always wanting") and the misuse of "love:" bell hooks says, "no love without justice" . . . but what does that look like?

My thought: Corduroy as disabled because he is missing a button and as therefore unloveable?

A Refreshing Look at the Urban Landscape: Beauty in the Urban Experience in Children's Picture Books | Rebecca Powell, Florida Southern College

Focused on Matt de la Pena's (author) & Christian Robinson's (illustrator) *Last Stop on Market Street* (2015) and Sharon Dennis Wyeth's (author) and Chris K. Soentpiet's (illustrator) *Something Beautiful* (1998) in terms of literature as a road map to social agency and of inter-subjectivity as the character actively participating in the social world. A network of support and a network of purposeful activity contribute to resiliency, i.e., in the character's ability to reframe occurrences.

2A. Exploring Abilities

Escaping the Island Prison in Jennifer Choldenko's *Alcatraz* Novels | Stephen Wolcott, Kirkwood Community College

Series of historical fiction YA novels set on Alcatraz Island in 1930's when prisoners often assigned to do the laundry, hence the title of the first book, *Al Capone Does My Shirts* (2009). Father of narrator is a prison guard and electrician; sister of the narrator is autistic. Set in a time before autism was officially diagnosed (1943) so reflects the earliest attempts to understand the condition and the earliest treatment types. See also Bruno Bettelheim's *The Empty Fortress* (1967). The books also are notable because they resist the trope of the disabled as morally better and because they portray the degree to

which disability affects the whole family without becoming maudlin. For example, the mother lies about her daughter's age (says she is younger than she really is) so she will be accepted at a school where she can receive therapy. The novel also deals with the daughter's physical maturation and sexuality and parallels the plight of released prisoners and autistic adults in navigating society.

Disability and Racial Inequality in Theodore Taylor's *The Cay* | Yvonne Medina, University of Florida

Focus is 1969 ChYA novel about an 11-year-old boy, whose mother is from Virginia, fleeing Curacao on the SS Hato (ironically, the only real boat with this name was a Japanese battleship sunk in 1944: <https://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?57854>) during WWII. The boat is torpedoed and the boy, Phillip, is stranded first on a raft and later on a small island (cay) in the West Indies with Timothy, an older black man. Phillip, very prejudiced against Timothy, becomes blind, and gradually learns to accept Timothy, who dies protecting Phillip from a storm. The book was and is criticized for promoting "colorblindness," a reductionist view of race that does not take into account the degree to which color affects acceptance and opportunity and can, therefore, be seen as a type of erasure. Blindness is used as a narrative prosthesis.

NOTE: In this session, I asked the question of authenticity in terms of who can write about particular peoples and asked if there are any authors who identify as being autistic (I had mentioned that the author of *Mockingbird* is the parent of an autistic child). Mike Jung was named as an author who self-identifies as autistic, but I have not yet found anything to confirm that. He does discuss struggling with depression.

11G. What Can Children's Literature Teach us about Healthcare Reform?

Medical, Criminal, or Public Health Problem? Substance Use, Health Care, and Children's Literature | Naomi Lesley, Holyoke Community College

Lesley noted the discrepancies between the way substance abuse is depicted in ChYA literature and in real life, especially in terms of care models: Individualized (blockers, rehab clinics, dependent on health insurance and personal wealth), public health (methadone clinics covered by Medicaid but inconvenient), and criminalization (subset of public health). Whereas 39% of people with substance abuse problems also have a separate mental health issue (dual diagnosis), almost no ChYA characters are depicted as having other problems. No characters or their families have problems finding or financing treatment. Drug use is not criminalized, although drug dealing is (see Walter Dean Meyers' *The Beast*). Alice Childress's 1973 novel, which was also made into a movie, *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, is one of the few to portray the whole community as contributing toward addiction and recovery. [The novel was one of eleven books cited in the Island Trees School District *Board of Education v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982) censorship case brought before the U.S. Supreme Court.] *The Hate You Give*, by Angie Thomas (2017) includes portrayals of the criminalization of addiction.

My Question: Lesley also suggested looking at addiction as a chronic disease, rather than one with a definitive cure. If addiction is or becomes classified as a chronic disease, how would that be affected by accessibility policies?

Popular Disability Narratives' Chilling Dismissal of Health Care Needs and a Civil Rights Crisis |
Abbye Meyer, ~~Holyoke Community College~~ Director of Grants at Mass Humanities
(<http://masshumanities.org>)

Meyer problematized the standard disability tropes found in the recent movie *Wonder*, including:

- Medicalizing disabilities rather than depicting the social issues involved; reducing social issues to bullying
- Ignoring insurance and other financial issues, even though these consume much time and energy
- Provoking pity for the disabled person
- Making the disabled kid the butt of the punchlines
- Portraying disabled children as burdens to their parents; pity the parents rather than the child; leads to acceptance of selective abortion and infanticide (Australian ethicist Peter Singer was mentioned in context, but it was unclear as to his position)
- Failing to offer the option of being proud of one's entire identity -- fix, rather than accept, and at what expense? The disabled person must change in order to be accepted.

Meyer also noted that most current ChYA texts accept rather than challenge the status quo, with regards to disabilities issues and especially the over-portrayal of rich disabled kids as compared with the under-portrayal of poor disabled kids, the issue of "medically necessary" treatments and how that leads to inequities of care, and the issue of self-acceptance. Books/series with more balanced portrayals:

- *Atypical*, a 2017-2018 made-for-Netflix series featuring an 18-year-old autistic character and his family
- *Laughing at My Nightmare*, a 2014 autobiography written by a 21-year-old man living with Spinal Muscular Atrophy
- *Speechless* (2016-present), an ABC TV sitcom featuring a high school student, from a working-class family, whose cerebral palsy leaves him unable to speak except by using a word/letter board he controls by using a laser pointer attached to his headgear.

Seas, trees, and responsibilities in the novels of Mildred Taylor and Cynthia Voigt | Sarah Hardstaff, University of Cambridge

Mildred Taylor's Logan family series, set in the 1930s in rural Mississippi, and Cynthia Voigt's Tillerman family series, set in the 1970s in Maryland, both include scenes involving access to health care and the cost of health care. In both books, one's health is portrayed as being one's individual responsibility to the point that characters must be coerced into accepting help, thus pathologizing socio-economic concerns about health. [A comment after the presentation noted that Mary in *The Little House* series is portrayed as refusing to accept government help when she becomes blind. Laura is portrayed as bearing the burden by sewing to pay for private care for Mary. In reality, Mary did accept government help.]

Discussion Notes: After the presentations, the discussion included recommendations of a number of books and other media, including:

Charlie Bartlett, a 2007 film about a high school student with ADHD who manipulates the prescription drug system to acquire various medications which he then dispenses-- along with therapeutic advice--to his fellow students.

Feminist, Queer, Crip (2013) by Alison Kafer. The blurb on Amazon reads: “In *Feminist, Queer, Crip* Alison Kafer imagines a different future for disability and disabled bodies. Challenging the ways in which ideas about the future and time have been deployed in the service of compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, Kafer rejects the idea of disability as a pre-determined limit. She juxtaposes theories, movements, and identities such as environmental justice, reproductive justice, cyborg theory, transgender politics, and disability that are typically discussed in isolation and envisions new possibilities for crip futures and feminist/queer/crip alliances. This bold book goes against the grain of normalization and promotes a political framework for a more just world.

Handle with Care (2009) by Jodi Picoult features a six-year-old child with osteogenesis imperfecta or brittle-bone disease. The disease affects the entire family as the parents are accused of child abuse and an older sister develops bulimia and begins cutting herself.

My Sister's Keeper (2004) by Jodi Picoult features a 13-year-old girl who was conceived specifically to be a “savior child” for her older sister who has leukemia. The girl sues for medical emancipation when she is asked to donate a kidney. An older brother Also made into a movie.

One (2015) by Sarah Crossan is a children's novel written in verse about a pair of conjoined sisters. Winner of the Carnegie Medal.

Sunny Side Up (2015) by Jennifer L. Holm (author) and Matthew Holm (illustrator), a brother-sister team, is a middle-grade graphic novel about a girl visiting her “really old” grandparents in Florida because her teenage brother is dealing with substance abuse back home.

Two Girls Staring at the Ceiling (2014), a YA novel in verse by Lucy Frank, tells of two girls with Crohn's disease sharing a hospital room. [Note: Read across the columns.]

What's Eating Gilbert Grape?, a 1993 film (based on the 1991 novel by Peter Hedges) about a young man caring for his morbidly obese mother and mentally challenged younger brother. Both show the ways in which family assume care for each other.

Also look for work by Shalini Vohra, a senior lecturer in marketing at Sheffield Hallam University. I couldn't find any particular books listed, but Vohra's website says, “My research interests include consumer psychology, psychology of finance, autism and it's portrayal in children's/young adult fiction, emotions, early career academics and co-production with children and young people. (<https://theconversation.com/profiles/shalini-vohra-317779>)

Accessible Teaching Lunch

The conference organizers include, as part of the registration process, sign-up information for themed lunch groups. Volunteers host small groups of 3-6 people who discuss various topics related to the profession. Amy Bennett-Zendzian, an instructor, writing consultant, and ESL specialist at Boston University, proposed and organized the Accessible Teaching lunch groups. She also later forwarded us her Fairy Tales syllabus and her tips for moving from an emphasis on accommodations to an emphasis on inclusion in teaching. Here is the Accessibility statement from her syllabus:

ACCESSIBILITY: We all learn in different ways. If there are circumstances that may affect your performance in this class, please talk to me so that we can work together to develop strategies for accommodations to satisfy both your learning needs and the course requirements. Whether or not you have a documented disability, there are many support services that are available to all students. Disability Services is the office responsible for assisting students with disabilities. If you have a disability that interferes with your learning (whether visible or invisible, physical or mental), Disability Services will work with you to determine appropriate accommodations for your courses, such as staggered homework assignments or note-taking assistance. This office will give you a letter outlining the accommodations you need that you can share with your teachers; specific information about your disability will remain private. If you have questions about accommodation, or what constitutes a disability, I invite you to speak with me, or to Disability Services. You can contact them by visiting the 2nd floor at 19 Deerfield Street; by e-mailing access@bu.edu; online at bu.edu/disability/; or by phone at 617-353-3658.

I attended one of the three Accessible Teaching lunch groups. Mine was hosted by MicKenzie Fasteland, a visiting assistant professor in writing at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, and there were two other attendees in the group.

MicKenzie, who identified herself as having a debilitating illness (not specified) that causes her to sometimes use a cane and sometimes a wheelchair, began the session by acknowledging that we each have different ways of learning and different physical and cognitive needs. She invited us to feel free to move about or stand and stretch, as needed, and to voice discomfort with any of the discussion. In this manner, she said she:

- Practices a pedagogy based on her own body and on modeling for her own students how she is/can be a site of learning
- Is committed to normalizing disability in the way we have normalized glasses as a tool for visual disabilities
- Calls attention to the capitalist framework that attaches worth solely to the ability to do labor and, therefore, is inherently dangerous to the disabled
 - Creates grade-free spaces for learning to take place
 - Creates choices as to what assignments look like
- Discusses invisible illnesses with her students and the tendency to protect oneself by not disclosing such illnesses
 - Is willing to be flexible with deadlines

- Works to normalize accessibility -- not just in the syllabus but on the first day by acknowledging varying needs and inviting students to meet their own needs (self-care)
- Made a conscious effort to do the emotional labor for her classes
- Is dedicated to creating an accessible space for learning
- Is aware that students are afraid or reluctant to go to SDS [AES, etc.] either to request accommodations or to report violations
- Makes sure captions are on or provides transcripts
- Lets students define what participation looks like to them (and then hold them to that); more about completion and engagement rather than a specific way of getting there

Other points of discussion:

Spoon Theory -- if you have a chronic illness, you start the day with less spoons than other people and you expend more than they do during the day, so you have to monitor their use; a way of measuring and meting out your energy to live your life

Self-Care as a capitalist, individualist approach **vs. Community Care** which sees the inherent worth of people regardless of perceived abilities or disabilities

“Crip-time”

MAKE IT NORMAL TO ASK FOR AND TO GET HELP

Other Notes:

- At last year’s conference (in Tampa), no provision had been made for gender-neutral restroom facilities. When this was pointed out, the reaction was a “blank face” . . . not sure if this was on the part of the hotel, the USF conference organizers, or the ChLA executive staff. This seemed to be the first such request ever received and, as such, was not anticipated. Accommodation was made . . . and this year gender-neutral restrooms were provided without needing to be requested, although I’m not sure how many or on what floors.
- The women’s restroom on the second floor of the San Antonio venue had two steps up inside the restroom itself . . . and no other way to access the stalls.
- An invited speaker commented on presentations involving animations as being non-compliant with ADA (“which was passed in 1990, people”).