

# Literature for children with special needs—a complex landscape

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Literature is the multitude of texts we resort to in order to engage in a fictional world, in a world of shared experiences, perhaps in a world with more meaning and excitement than our daily routines. Regardless of the media that carry the literary elements, here we find what sometimes makes our lives more poignant, less restricted or more bearable.

To invite children into this world is a valiant quest, not least children with special needs. They need literature adjusted to their ways of experiencing, they need to share texts with people around them and they need to meet literature on their own level, wherever they are at a given point of time.

The sorts of literature available to children with special needs depend in one way or another on the view Society has on this group. No wonder then that disability studies have been most concerned about the scope of literature available to children with special needs as well as how disabled persons are depicted in children's literature. Thus, the discussions around literature and children with special needs tend to evolve around which status or image the books assign to different children.

In research on special needs, the so-called social model of disability is still the major paradigm (Hunt, 1966). In this model a disability or special need is not primarily a pathological condition, but rather seen as the result of how Society facilitates the life of the individual. This is of course strongly connected to the words that we use to describe these persons, the extent to which their voices are heard and also the roles they are given in stories.

Literature in general contains many images of people with special needs, as does literature with a particular target group, for example a group with a diagnosis. In addressing these literatures as well as those books and genres having a particular target group, for example a group with a diagnosis, disability studies have tended to evaluate the texts by the image they convey of people with special needs, not primarily the literary qualities of the books. Contrasting this paradigm, in this chapter I will look at the works of one prominent representative from disability studies, Joan K. Blaska, and discuss the implications of her views for the literature and the readers involved.

## **Blaska theorizing the disabled**

The scholars of disabled theory are concerned about stereotypes. Blaska (2004) puts much effort into exploring the child with special needs as a motive in children's literature. She focuses on the reader's potential for recognizing himself or herself in the characters of the story. Books are described as mirrors that show us characters that have feelings and experiences similar to our own. With special address to books for children with special needs, she says:

Children with disabilities or illnesses need to see people similar to them. Perhaps no group has been as overlooked and inaccurately presented in children's books as individuals with disabilities. Most often they were not included in stories and when they were, many negative stereotypes prevailed such as characters who were pitiful or pathetic, evil or superheroes, or a burden and incapable of fully participating in the events of everyday life (Blaska, 2004, p. 1).

Blaska has read award-winning books systematically, made surveys of school-books and made statistics, showing that disabled persons in children's books are grossly underrepresented. Her research gives her weight as a watchdog for the literary establishment. She invites reviewers to use certain criteria to assess children's books where people with disabilities are present. In her view and with her words, good books:

1. Promote empathy not pity.
2. Depict acceptance not ridicule.
3. Emphasize success rather than, or in addition, to failure.
4. Promote positive images of persons with disabilities or illness.
5. Assist children in gaining accurate understanding of the disability or illness.
6. Demonstrate respect for persons with disabilities or illness.
7. Promote attitude of "one of us" not "one of them."
8. Use language which stresses *person first, disability second* philosophy, i.e. Jody who is blind. [my italics]
9. Describe the disability or person with disabilities or illness as realistic (i.e., not subhuman or superhuman.)

10. Illustrate characters in a realistic manner. (Blaska, 2004)

My claim is that the list puts the disabled in the place of the subaltern (Spivak, 1988) by showing how the disabled are traditionally defined by others as monsters, misfits, condemned by God, morally inferior and a threat. Thus Blaska identifies with a modern understanding of the situation of the subaltern, and the solidarity she displays with young readers is clearly laudable. However, her list of virtues is also reminiscent of an old discourse concerning children's literature. As long as we have had stories tailored for children, there has been a polarity between aesthetics and pedagogics. Traditionally, literature for children should not only be good, it should be good *for something*. According to Hunt (1999), children's literature studies are inclined to neglect the aesthetic dimensions of the texts and focus on the intended meanings. He sums it up precisely by saying that readings have been "skewed towards the reader and affect, rather than towards the book as artefact" (Hunt, 1999, p. 7). This polarity is described by Uprichard (2009) and also Qvortrup (2009) when they discuss conceptions of childhoods by pointing at two views of children: Children as *beings* and children as *becomings*. The children that are "beings" should be offered the full plethora of literature and media types available, just like adults. This is their right. But if we view children as "becomings," they might have more need for preparations for what is to come, for instructions for their future, and all of their literature should be educational in some way. Blaska seems to support this view of children's literature, and in her view there definitely exists a literature that is good for children, and one that is less good, not least for children with special needs.

Blaska's approach to literature has some implications that call for comments. First, her view of stories as mirrors for the readers gives prevalence to texts of the realistic type, and psychological realism is paramount. Her criteria are particularly suited for books from everyday life featuring disabled children. This literature can certainly show us how people act and react and also help us reflect. But this leaves out literature such as traditional fairy-tales. These stories take place in a fantastic fictional universe, the characters are literary types with little psychological realism to them, and they go through tests that are symbols and rituals more than real-life events. Still, fairy-tales are being used in work with children with special needs, for example in psychiatry, as shown by Bruno Bettelheim (1976). Characters with unusual physical features may appear in roles as helpers or antagonists. However, they are not meant to be depictions of the disabled. These characters, as well as the hero, show us different forces of the psyche, and the hero's project should be understood as every person's inner

processes to find mental balance. Torgeir Haugen, for instance, in his chapter in this book, explores the value of oral fairy tales for children with special needs.

Second, Blaska's points prescribe an aesthetical and ethical literature along certain lines. When stories are required to give hope, or at the very least give an accurate understanding of a disability, the full potential of literature could suffer. The concept of catharsis may illustrate this. Aristotle in his *Poetics* defines a tragedy as a text that has catharsis as its goal. Through pity and fear the reader attains a purging of those feelings. The concept of catharsis opens up different ways to see texts, for example to see the text as a possibility to engage in the big problems and the grave injustices life offers, to leave to the literary characters to meet traumas and to be able to abreact and relieve tensions of the heart or mind by experiencing the drama. The result may also be that the reader gets new insights into man's "finiteness in the face of the power of fate" (Gadamer, 1995, p. 132), so that the literature creates common ground for all different sorts of people, with all our special needs. The same argument could be used for comedy, which teaches us to laugh at ourselves and our flaws. The prevalent motive in the classical comedy is not primarily the ailment or the poor condition that a person experiences, but the ridiculous way in which he deals with it. In a world where humour is widely accepted as a safety valve to cope with fate, whether personal or political, the question is why these sorts of humour should not also be for children with special needs. Ridicule is one aspect of humour that will be discussed below.

Children with special needs are in a particular situation, since many of them have experiences that have made them mature before their time in certain areas. Others may have conditions including cognitive limitations, with less chance to benefit from therapeutic literature. But common for all groups is that secondary readers are important: Parents, teachers, siblings, therapists and friends are among the people who pick books and who read, and through this literature they learn about the condition of the child in question. This may influence the projects of the authors, so that they miss out on the chance to write exclusively to entertain or to give an aesthetic experience. This leads to a paradoxical situation, as the secondary target group becomes a reason for the writers to approach the primary target group in particular ways. The adults—the most experienced readers, with good capacities for appreciating the aesthetical variety or experimental elements in literature—become the reason that the authors emphasize the pedagogic, moral or therapeutic element in their texts. There may arise a situation where this dynamic may limit the range of plots in books for children with special needs or books where these children are part of the story. However, one could imagine a reverse situation: That the writers used the knowledge of their dual audience to

cater for readers in different positions, both adults and children. It is possible to combine this in the same text (Nikolajeva, 1997). Blaska's list is a reminder that there exists a world of stories where children with special needs are depicted in monotonous ways, so that it actually becomes less interesting as literature and more prone to promote unfortunate images of disabled children. Some of these stories are commercial products with few ethical or aesthetical ambitions, others represent good intentions with wanting results.

Blaska's list is well suited for accommodating the literature of good intentions. Here authors may find a checklist to proofread their works to avoid traces of stereotypes or bigotry. Still, literature is a complex kind of cultural products, and this article will look at some of these points with a critical eye. The comments will be focused on the first five points. They demonstrate the diversity of the field by including reader attitudes, writer attitudes, aesthetic choices—like plot—and non-fictional elements like fact orientation. The other points will be omitted, as they are related to the first, or already commented on in the introduction.

## **Pity**

The first point is pity. When Blaska warns against pity, she risks dismissing a substantial amount of literature. Sentimentality is one of the keys of understanding the success of the novel as a text type, as it rose to a dominating position during the Romantic era (Watt, 1957). H. C. Andersen is part of this tendency in literature. He writes about the position of being different in his story about the ugly duckling. The story begins with an exposition, giving the reader an overview of the landscape and an understanding of the environment the plot unfolds in. But quite soon the story mobilizes a whole arsenal of devices to evoke emotions. The ducks of the pond are a familiar sight, easy to visualize for the reader. Their colours symbolize the value the environment places on the birds, with the white swans on top of the hierarchy. Size also appeals to emotions—the smaller the ducklings, the cuter they are, but this one is big and clumsy. The depiction of the relation between group and individual speaks to everyone who has had the experience of being in the position of the loner. In the dialogue the collective voices of mock and contempt evoke familiar feelings for many. Pity for the vulnerable is the aim of the text, in the sense that it seeks to make the reader feel sorry for the duckling. The pity is closely related to sympathy, as we can see in a definition: "Sympathy and sorrow aroused by the misfortune or suffering of another" ([www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com)). In the story the intention is to wake these feelings in the reader. The sentiments are their own reward, and surely played a part in helping Andersen sell his stories. Empathy was part of the

romantic period, where feelings had high status. Charles Dickens' stories are well known to create empathy in order to promote social changes (Diniejkko, 2012). In these ways writers like Andersen and Dickens have influenced society, and continue to do so.

“The Ugly Duckling” is also an example of therapy. Andersen regarded himself as an outsider with an unrealized potential, who succeeded against all odds. His stories often evolve around the same topic, with the therapeutic effects it may have to rephrase your life story time after time, and add hope and success to the plot. The same would apply to many of his readers. Andersen's religious view of life (Mylius, 2007) adds a third dimension: The Christian person has an obligation to care for people in need. Now this sentimentality does not necessarily lead to the pity that creates an “us and them” situation. The Christian idea of charity is based on the equality of all men before God, with the use of Christ as the example, the model that does not acknowledge rank nor riches. The particular kind of pity that Blaska criticizes is the one that is related to relief that we are not in the situation of the victim in the story, or the pity that contains a derogatory tendency towards the disabled: pity without compassion. We can hear these voices in the dialogue in the story. However, they are there in order to stir certain feelings in the reader and to make the reader engage in a protest. Neither the duckling nor the farmyard animals are intended as models for the reader, but they clarify feelings and choices we must engage in. The characters represent voices that we all hear, around us and within. These stories have a meaning that the reader must decipher, they are not blueprints for life projects or fates.

## **Ridicule**

In her list, Blaska also warns against stories that depict ridicule instead of acceptance. Here she moves away from the ideal of a realistic presentation. Ridicule is at times how people approach the unknown or the difficult, and the story that hides this, withholds information. One of the challenges of the victim is to deal with this ridicule, and here stories may be of help. In “The Ugly Duckling”, the victim has no defense against the taunting from the group. One may argue that Andersen in this case normalizes an unfortunate situation. This is a real danger. If all stories about children with special needs contain a mocking chorus picking on the weak, it may lead to a general acceptance of this situation and lead us to presume that our only option in life is to play the part of the mockers or the part of the child with a special need or his/her helpers. But the imminent need is for a story that could empower the victim. The solution for the duckling is not to cope with the taunters, but to transform into something

acceptable, apparently. This message is hard to accept. In my view it even is a misunderstanding to interpret the story in this way. This is in fact a story that shows us how the duckling discovers what was always there. The point of the story is that all persons need to see their innate value, regardless of how they may be perceived by others. The duckling is ridiculed, but the taunters are actually ignorant or misinformed, and they do not get the last laugh.

Not only ridicule, but also other kinds of humour is a strategy in stories concerning children with special needs, especially in modern books. McGrail & Rieger (2014) point out different types of humour, among them humorous stories, practical jokes, teasing exchanges and playful banter. These texts are often written by authors with the same experiences or disabilities that they write about. Children who read these stories will be presented with the self-irony of the victim, among other examples. The point of humour in such books sometimes is to show a character's state of mind or to show that he does have humour, or to help other characters in the story to relax (*op. cit.*, p. 298). The teacher who reads or recommends a book for the pupils will have to come to terms with this element in the stories. When we meet ridicule or humour in stories, our literary approach is important: Do we read in order to understand the values of the author, do we read to get a more or less disinterested impression of the life and time of the characters, or do we focus on the aesthetic sides of the text? As soon as the reader suspects that the author writes according to an ideological programme, the reader may put up a defense wall of scepticism or indifference. However, reading the text as a purely aesthetic product may also be unfortunate. A mocking rhyme may have poetic qualities, but we do not want to add to the repertoire of school bullies by reading such texts in class too often. McGrail & Rieger refer to a story from a book about a character with an ADHD spectrum disorder (Zimmet, 2001), driving his teacher to the point where he shouts "Eddie, enough!", thus earning Eddie his nickname. From now on he is known as "Eddie Enough." Such stories are not meant to be read as anecdotes for the entertainment of the audience. It is part of a bigger story with sinister sides to it. It is the teacher's responsibility to make sure everybody reads the whole story, and that all go through a reflection process afterwards that becomes a common experience for the group. When a group of readers pursue literature in this way, many types of humour and many types of texts may contribute to new insights and to literary competences.

## Success

Blaska (2004) also mentions success in the list of criteria—stories for children with special needs should contain a project that succeeds, at least in some way. This could mean that the disabled person in the story copes better, manages to enlighten his fellow beings, transcends boundaries or is accepted in some way or other. Literature for small children tends to have harmonizing plots, for example the home-away-home structure, where challenges are met on a journey, but finally overcome, and things can return to normality as the hero returns home. Small children's books also face the success criterion. We regard small children as particularly vulnerable, thus requiring a “strong, safe adult narrator-personality” (Wall & Crevecoeur, 2010), guaranteeing that the message about life is always a reassuring one. Success in the plot could mean that the situation in the fictitious world improves, or that the important projects don't fail.

But success can mean several things. Books for small children sometimes converge towards toys. One example is Eric Hill's flap-books about Spot, another one is interactive play books like Hervé Tullet's books for small children or some children with special needs. Here the reader is invited to be part of the story-making. The story is the reader's journey through the possible plots in the modalities of the book. Now the reading of the book is a success of its own. Often the same applies to literature for children with special needs. It is an achievement to find a book with an age adequate level, a style that appeals to the individual and modalities that communicate well. But literature can be found in many shapes, for example assisted by digital platforms, or in the experimental form that Birgitta Cappelen and Anders-Petter Andersson have created for children with special needs through the RHYME project in Oslo, with playful multi-aesthetic installations where one can discover and design stories and literary impressions of one's own (Cappelen & Andersson, 2016).

The success criterion is sometimes challenged to a greater degree in literature for older children. When *Gummi-Tarzan* was published in 1975, it met with astonishment. This is the story of Ivan Olsen, who falls victim to bullies who harass him in numerous ways and make his life difficult. Ivan gets little support from adults around him. His father recommends him to become stronger and to fight back against the bullies. Ivan is not able to do this, and the plot contains a series of events where Ivan fails to succeed in all situations, both academically, socially and in skills that are important in the fellowship of the children. The solution comes in magical form, as a fantastic element enters the novel. A witch grants him a wish, and he now becomes able to reverse all the situations in the plot, in a line of revenges. This is a turn

in the plot in many ways, and here the reader is challenged to create meaning. Why does Ivan resort to fantasies about fairy tales? Or should the witch be considered as a real person in the story? Do we really need magic to fight bullying? What would we really like to happen to bullies, if we could make a difference? It becomes clear that Ivan Olsen chooses the path of revenge, and few would blame him.

The style of the text represents an interesting comment on the topic. From the start the narrating voice seems strangely detached. Cruelty and humiliation is presented as natural or unavoidable elements in life. Ivan has no choice but to resign. This is in accord with the story of many victims of bullying: they have the sensation that they deserve their treatment, and have no right to oppose their tormenters. In *Gummi-Tarzan*, the descriptive narrating voice mirrors this. The reader must make a personal choice of sympathy. Ivan is the main character and the only true candidate for identification, and there is no doubt that he deserves a better life. As he receives magic powers, the reader may rejoice over the reestablishment of justice. However, the magic stops working after some time, and Ivan finds himself once more in the position of the victim. Revenge does not bring success. This may be a conclusion that many mature readers would condone, but the story doesn't seem to present good alternatives for Ivan Olsen. The only success that can be achieved here, is that the reader decides to use the story as an inspiration to oppose bullying. "Gummi-Tarzan" is the most popular of all of Ole Lund Kirkegaard's books, and it has struck a chord with both children and adults. By use of a plot that seems to oppose the principle of success in Blaska (2004)—at least in its simplest interpretation—the book has managed to achieve an unprecedented impact.

## **Optimism**

The optimistic tendency that Blaska recommends in children's literature is not often challenged. Sometimes heroes in children's books fail or die, but the rule is that this is dramatic and that it contributes to positive changes and new insight. Astrid Lindgren kills her hero characters in *Bröderna Lejonhjärta* (1973). This is a story about two brothers, of which the youngest (Karl) is in the position of the child with special needs. His condition is not specified, but he gets wind of this by listening to his parents' concerned and hushed conversations from the adjoining room, and it becomes clear that he has a lethal condition and that death is imminent. Now there is a fire, in which the older brother, Jonatan, rescues his sick little brother, but Jonatan dies in the effort. This induces mixed feelings in the brother who remains alive. The plot gives ample opportunity to muse on the toughness of life and the

unfairness it may offer. But there is optimism in the story, presented as a counteracting power: Jonatan becomes a symbol of hope. He tells Karl stories about the afterlife, where an exciting existence awaits. This is a land of bonfires and fairy tales, as he puts it. The power of storytelling thus becomes an expression of optimism, reducing death to a mere transition. When Karl dies, the two boys meet again in a place called Nangijala, where they live in an adventure-filled world. Here their frail boy bodies are replaced, and they ride horses and live by the bonfires. The disability of Karl is gone. It is a problem that this optimistic turn is linked to death. Children with severe conditions or short future prospects face a harsh reality, and a story like this could impair the will to live. On the other hand, the ideas of a book like this is hardly new to a child in this situation. Living the fantasy through a book is preferable by far to a suicide attempt.

The new and exciting land of Nangijala represents the dream of a life without disability. One may ask if it is a good thing for children with special needs to indulge in this motive. Prevailing ideologies put much effort into broadening the concept of normality to include people with disabilities. But children with disabilities often face this personal challenge: How can life be better? Hope of improvement is a motivator for their training to master prostheses, endure operations or regain lost abilities. Disability is not a fixed and unchangeable position—it depends a great deal on the environment, the condition itself and the mental and physical coping of the person. To read about this in a fantasy book could be motivational. The third element of optimism in the novel appears as an evil tyrant appears, threatening the bliss. Most of the text is dedicated to the fight against the terrible Tengil. The brothers play a key part in his downfall, through the display of sheer courage. Though they die, their death is not in vain. It is in spite of his fear that Karl fulfils the prophecy and the world of Nangijala may be delivered from evil. Here Lindgren challenges depictions of disabled persons as either victims or superheroes. The optimism of the story is mixed with the fearfulness exuded by the evil powers, and it would be true to say that the ending in some ways is an open one. A text that is ambivalent regarding optimism could represent a psychological realism that may provide language to describe challenges of the disabled. This is one of the prerogatives of literature, but it requires that we refrain from absolute requirements of optimism in these stories.

## Positive images

Blaska also asks authors to depict positive images of the disabled. This view collides with influential depictions of disabled through the literary history. Some readings will illustrate that complex or even villainous disabled characters in stories may be preferable: they place the disabled in a more unpredictable position and may assist readers in perceiving them as people with features common to all.

The images of the disabled throughout literature represent a diversity. In *The Olympic Mount*, the limp Hephaistos works as a blacksmith, married to the goddess of love, Aphrodite. His role in the gallery of Greek gods is one where he is an opposite of his wife, making her appear more beautiful. Hephaistos wields power by his skills, not his appearance. His position is ambivalent. He has respect and he has the celestial equivalent of a trophy wife. But his ugly appearance is linked to the very work he performs, which secures his position, so he is caught in an evil spiral, crouching over the fire the dark, with his long arms and weak legs. His blacksmith skills make others jealous, and he himself harbours jealousy issues regarding his wife. As a representative of the disabled, the Hephaistos character sends diverse messages. For children with special needs he is of special interest, both for his physical disability, but also for his social position and his ability to fend for himself. Books, movies and games about Greek myths have a good potential here to make disabilities a concern for a wider audience.

The Gospel stories contain many healing miracles. Children and adults appear in the roles of sick, blind, deaf, lame, possessed or lepers. Their primary position is often that of helpless, disrespected outcasts. This is not a positive image. In fact, their main function is to confirm the status of Christ, by giving him opportunity to show his healing powers. The worse their situation is, the better they demonstrate the coming of the Kingdom. However, these people are more than mere tools in a higher plan. They seem to be one of the main concerns of the Christ. When he asks them to keep quiet about their healing, he shows that the persons themselves are the goal of the miracles, not the promotion of a message. This is a positive signal, and on top of that: Their life stories are met with interest by their benefactor. When people ask who is under God's wrath and is responsible for the condition of a disabled person's problems, Jesus reproaches them, insisting that the ailment is no-one's fault. Here the point is that all humans are the same, and all things could happen to all sorts of people. As he approaches a blind man, Jesus asks the man what he wants him to do (Mark, 10, 51). The answer—give me my eyesight—is as touching as it is simple. Sometimes the healing is not complete right away. In Mark 8, 28, Jesus asks a blind man if he can see. After being prayed

for, he says that his sight is blurred, and that he only sees something that looks like trees walking around. After another prayer, his sight is normal. Here the disabled person's own account is emphasized, and his needs are met in the way that is important to him. The stories of healing are concrete and direct, with closely linked causes and effects.

These stories can be found in Kees de Kort's book series for young mentally disabled people (*Bibelen forteller* [The Bible tells], 2013). De Kort visited places with relevant children in order to develop an artistic approach that could communicate. The stories are short, and the pictures tell much of the story, without depending on the text. This is quite remarkable as early as 1965, bearing in mind that Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* was published in 1963, breaking ground for stories where pictures and text carry equal parts of the story. In de Kort's books, depth perspective is hardly used, and people's faces are emphasized, displaying their feelings. Jesus is immediately identifiable by his attire, which never changes. In the stories we meet a child who is wakened from the dead and a blind man who is healed. The actual healing power of God and the religious point is not in focus in the books. This is an adaptation to the target group. They are invited to engage in the story, not forced to reflect. The faces are unusually big, displaying emotions. The movement of people is often two-dimensional, as they move to the left or the right, like on a stage. Houses look like props, and only elements relevant to the story are shown. The blind man has a piece of cloth around his head, he has his beggar's cup and he has a cane, quite modern in appearance. The story is all about the persons interacting in the plot, and a literary dialogue with children about the pictures will naturally deal with the main points of the story, simply because that's what is displayed. The story is quite open, with few words to guide the reading. What do they say? What do they feel? What will happen next? The disabled character rises up, and without the aid of others, he moves forward and lets his voice be heard. He becomes the active part, he gets to be the centre of attention, and the crowd must step down and become spectators to a drama that they cannot influence. To read such stories can be an empowering experience for children with special needs.

We will look at a few other characters that demonstrate that positive images is not the only answer to promoting equality. Not just the Bible, but a multitude of so-called World Classics are adapted to children, from *Gulliver's Travels* to *Treasure Island*. It is a mixed crowd of characters that meet us in these stories, originally intended for an adult audience. *Gulliver's Travels* was written as a political satire for adults. For children, the story presents the experiences of the person who is too small, or too big. Practical problems arise, and Gulliver overcomes them by being inventive or by accepting help. In Lilliput he is the giant

who helps the Emperor beat his enemies. He also puts out a fire by urinating on it, thus saving lives, but in an improper way, so that he gets in trouble. The big and clumsy human gets lonely in a world where everything is adapted to tiny persons, and where rumours and whispers in the court are out of his reach. When he escapes to Brobdingnag, he finds himself in the opposite position. He is tiny in a world of giants. Here his life is constantly at risk, since he must be handled by people with immense strength and little experience with delicate midgets the size of a mouse. His particular condition is not an asset for him, and his image certainly is not positive in every way. But wherever Gulliver is, he turns out to be interesting for people in power, and he comes in contact with the emperors in both countries. He also retains his self respect and struggles to be recognized as a thinking human being, in which he succeeds to a great extent. When he needs to leave, it is not so much because of his size as because of intrigues he becomes involved in. This is a positive image of a person with special needs. In fact, his surroundings are the reason for his challenges. The story demonstrates that we are all susceptible to similar experiences that will lead to problems, unless we come into a position where we can communicate our needs and our competences to people around us.

Quite different is the story of *Treasure Island* (1883), in which Robert Louis Stevenson takes the reader to a world of piracy and evil. The idiosyncrasies of the villains are conspicuous elements in the story, with the one-legged Long John Silver as the apogee. He is, however, a complex character, displaying greed for money and the will to deceive his mates on one hand, but on the other hand the will to guide and protect Jim Hawkins, the child who is left in his care, and who ends up as his antagonist in the story. The handicap is something that Long John fights and conquers, being a fearsome opponent in physical battle in spite of his crutch. If disabled children need stories about characters that are not stereotypes, this novel offers an interesting figure. Still, Long John is essentially corrupt, and he has become the model for stereotypes like Disney's Captain Hook. In the movie adaptation *Treasure Planet* (2002) Long John saves Jim's life by use of his prosthetic hand in a dramatic scene, leaving his ship to destruction. The science fiction-movie shows us an artificial arm with superhuman strength, thus giving the disability a positive display. Long John also leaves Jim in a much more friendly atmosphere than in the original novel. Both the outer and the inner presentation of the disabled person is more positive.

One story that has had a big impact on popular culture, is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). The original story was written as part of an informal contest as to whom in a group of friends could write the most eerie story. The result was a captivating story of a scientist with good intentions who uses tools of his trade to bring life to a human-like being, inspired by the

life signs that Galvani could evoke in a dead frog by the use of electricity. This story has proved to resonate with the modern mindset in profound ways. Instead of a good being, Dr. Frankenstein creates a monster. The story of a medical operation resulting in a monster is not much in line with the ideal of positive representations of the disabled. But the point of the story is a different one. Just like in the stories of the Golem, it is a story about hubris. When Man plays God, things go wrong. The story is a warning against science without boundaries, and Dr. Frankenstein has become the model of mad scientists in countless stories and movies. The monster is most often shown as a primitive destructive force. However, Mary Shelley endows the monster with both speech, thoughts and feelings in her novel. The reader gets a heart-gripping impression of what it is like to be a human being, but with features that make people reject you, even your creator. The monster's efforts to contact people or to explain his needs are useless in a world that cannot tolerate this kind of diversity.

The story is rarely retold to children in this way. Instead the motive is reinvented with the mad scientist as the main character, as in Genndy Tartakovsky's tv series *Dexter's laboratory*. Here a genius boy has the role of the mad scientist. His projects often involve tampering with human life. In the first season of the series, he creates a device that turns people into animals, yielding strange results, he gives his sister a cookie that makes people immensely tall, and he finds a way to accelerate his age. The parallel to Shelley's Frankenstein is obvious, but in *Dexter's laboratory* the victims of his research are purely comical figures. We see the results of his work, but the main point in the series is how the experiments endanger the position of Dexter, the creator. Dexter is an outsider. Unlike his sister, he is even given a foreign accent, according to Tartakovsky because all important scientists have accents. This cliché is prolific, probably due to the role of certain scientists during the dawn of the media age: Einstein, Oppenheimer and Freud. The media version of exiled scientists bereaved of all but their research may be seen as a projection of the same sentiments that make *Frankenstein* a tragic story. In modern society children with high intelligence are recognized as a group with special needs and special schools. High IQ often comes with additional conditions, for example in the Asperger/autism syndrome spectre. Reactions from the surroundings may also contribute to problems children have in relation to high intelligence. Dexter, however, may add to the stereotypes related to these children.

*The Powerpuff Girls* from Cartoon Network give a more profound impression of the monster's point of view. They are creations of a scientist who wants to make three nice girls, but he spills a little of the ingredient "X" into the petri dish, and the result is three super-powered girls. They soon learn how to fight enemies of society. But their position is difficult,

because people are both impressed and repulsed by their super-powers. This leads to a loneliness that the girls display in many episodes, resembling the emotions of Frankenstein's monster. They are the strongest persons that exist in their world, but they constantly seek approval. This also makes them vulnerable for attacks from people who contend to offer love, but who are only interested in their extraordinary gifts. These examples show how topics relevant to children with special needs can be found in classical stories, and in their adaptations for children. If one reads different versions of stories, it may turn out that stereotypes are not stereotypes after all. Good or not, they offer an opportunity to reflect on the position of the child with special needs, for both the child and its supporters, and its surroundings.

### **Accurate understanding**

The fifth point in Blaska's list is about getting an accurate understanding of the situation of the child by a reading the book. In a non-fictional book, this is an acceptable goal. But focus on facts can destroy good stories. Books about orphans are one example. Orphans are prolific in children's literature, but they rarely give an accurate understanding of what it can be like to be an orphan. *Pollyanna* (Eleanor H. Porter, 1913) and *Heidi* (Johanna Spyri, 1881) are two examples. The absence of a family provides the authors with an opportunity to highlight the individual properties of the children, such as courage and endurance. Tarzan, who is also orphaned, becomes king of the apes in the forest. But it becomes clear that he owes part of his success to his ancestry in the British nobility. He is therefore also a simple literary type, just like Heidi represents romantic notions of the clean, unspoilt nature that can bring life to the weakened people of the industrial towns. Both Heidi and Pollyanna have a redeeming effect on their surroundings, as misanthropists around them turn around after realising that the girls are a godsend. These children belong to a modern version of the exemplum story or the hagiography, where we meet saint-like children who work miracles (Koppel, 1979). In a modern world their lives would be categorised as child labour, filled with neglect and child abuse, whereas the stories portray them as little adults, dealing with hardships, but possessing the inner strength to prevail. Instead of addressing a society that institutionalises or ignores tragic childhoods, these authors present the happy exceptions where endearing children with impressing characters succeed in their projects. Low in accuracy, they have high appeal as stories, but to a cost.

Modern writers of children's literature can easily make the same mistake. This has something to do with the nature of literature. A good story usually contains something unusual, something enigmatic, or a situation that needs to be resolved. When a person with special needs enters a story, it is convenient to let that character contribute with surprising, mystical, revolting or heroic elements. What disabled theory discusses, is why it seems difficult to present disabled persons as individuals that happen to have a disability, not the other way around: A disabled being who also has human features. McGrail (2014) refers to several studies that show how movies and graphic novels (like super hero "comics") depict the disabled in unfortunate ways. Often the villain stutters or has a prosthesis. The disability is an external sign of an internal deficiency. Sometimes the disability itself is what has made the crook a bitter man, thus linking it even closer to his moral depravation. This sort of stereotype is a risk for the literary value of the story, since the plot easily becomes predictable, just like the characters.

One children's book about disability, *El Deafo* (2014), demonstrates how accuracy and literary value can be combined. It uses the super hero motive and turns it around, in a story about hearing impairment. The main character is a girl who begins in a new school, and she needs a big hearing aid, the "Phonic Ear," in order to be part of a class of hearing children. It is awkward for her to be different, and she hides the device as well as possible. Still, she is worried about how she will be received, and through the pictures and text she shares her concerns with the reader. The comic strip format opens up two different fictional layers. Firstly, it refers to the medium of comic books/graphic novels, which is the place where most of the stories about super heroes were conceived, and from where they spread into other media. The front page of the book shows a super hero soaring in the sky, with a cape and trousers in the traditional Superman colours. The contrast between the super hero image and the disabled child is striking, but still, there she flies with her cape, managing to make the chord of her hearing aid twist into letters that form the title of the book. This picture is not ridicule. It is a symbolic representation of the life experiences of the main character in the book. Ability is an important topic for her, and throughout the story she is situated in different positions of a continuum from disabled to super-empowered. When she discovers that the hearing aid can make her hear things that others cannot hear, for example voices in neighbouring rooms, it becomes part of her self-conception: In some aspects she is actually a super-hearer, just like Superman. But the super-hero image is also one of irony. The stereotype of the disabled as a particularly unique and brave individual lurks behind. These two topics are exactly what the book is about: how does the main character feel, how super is

she in different situations? And what does it require of her to manage to live among hearing people, does she need to be extraordinary?

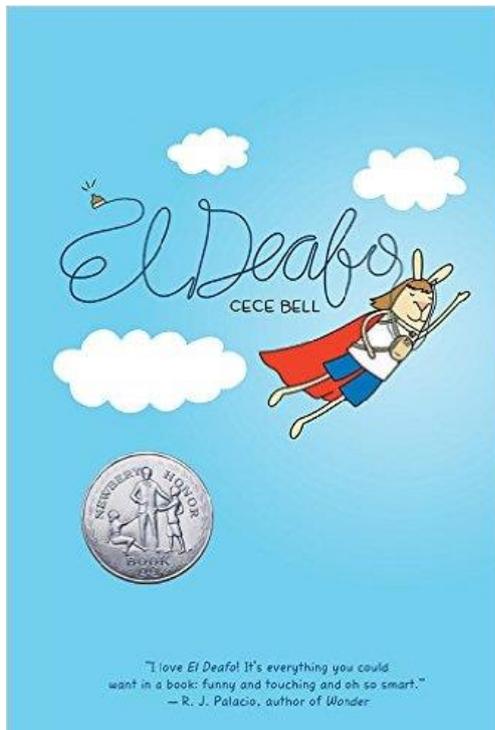
In order to convey the nuances in the existence of the disabled child, the story uses the pictures and text to form a combination, an iconotext, where the different modalities carry different parts of the story. The text fills several functions. Sometimes it informs about the progress of the plot. The narrator explains what will happen, where we are and who are with us. Elsewhere we meet text in the form of dialogue, in speech balloons. Here the text sometimes deviates from the plot: We read that the main character is sitting in class, happy to be able to use her hearing aid to hear what is being said in class, but the pictures show her in the hallway. Behind her the words of the teacher are written out in big letters: “Go straight to the principal’s office, now!” Evidently her preoccupation with her hearing aid in class has not gone down well with her teacher, but the reader must fill the hole in text and pictures to make sense of the story.

The pictures also convey meaning in different ways. The most striking feature is that the persons in the story are depicted as rabbits, not people. These rabbits walk on two, use their hands, talk like people and live in buildings. This anthromorphism alludes to books like Beatrix Potter’s *Peter Rabbit*, A. A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh* and Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows*, where we meet animals in clothing and in different levels of human shape and behaviour. In *El Deafo* the characters hardly retain any of their animal-likeness, and one may wonder what lies behind the choice of representation. Burke and Copenhaver (2004) point out how the dehumanising of characters increases the psychological distance to the events in the story, so that it is possible to treat more threatening or awkward topics. This is a good explanation also in this case: The challenges of the characters belong to a half-fantasy world of *rabbits*, and it is possible to use this book in a class where there may be a *human* with hearing problems. Rabbits are also endearing creatures, so that children may tend to be interested in reading about them. Children’s experiences with the prolific anthropomorphisms in children’s literature make this a natural choice, and in this way the author also places the plot in a literary world, increasing the distance to real life events further. However, the story goes on in an otherwise very realistic world—in homes, in schools and in the hospital. Perhaps the author uses the literature-type animals to be able to move further in the realistic end of the scale.

The ears of the rabbit are part of the transformation of the story into the animal kingdom, but they also serve as a display of the hearing aid equipment, making it visible for all. In the book we find quite accurate and minute descriptions of the challenges of a hearing

impaired child. We hear about the difficulties of lip-reading, the comedy of misinterpreting words and the not so funny reactions from different people around the main character. The rabbit face turns out to be a good device for demonstrating what words look like for a lip-reader: The comic book medium makes it possible to show sequences like in a slow motion movie, demonstrating each sound the lip-reader must recognize. The comic book medium also allows bigger pictures, for example the anatomy of the hearing impaired person, complete with socks, underwear and hearing aid, with explanatory comments. This allusion to non-fiction has a comical effect.

There are also more allusions to literature, for example Sherlock Holmes, who serves as an inspiration to look for clues, which the deaf person often needs to do in order to perceive what is going on verbally. The strength of the story is the attention to detail and at the same time making good progress in an interesting, funny and sometimes shocking story. What happens when the teacher forgets to turn off the microphone that transmits directly to the hearing impaired, and then goes to the bathroom? How does it feel when someone says to you the ambivalent words: “are you deaf?” The book is indeed an accurate presentation of the experiences of the hard of hearing, but at the same time it is a fascinating story. The rabbits turn out to be very much like humans, and here they depict humans that may sometimes be perceived as different. It is a main point in the book that we are all equal, and with rabbits doing the part of people, race vanishes as a topic. Instead the emphasize shifts to individuals, and in the last square there are two super heroes: “El Deafo and her true friend—you!”



## Conclusion

There is a multitude of books available for different types of children with special needs. The diversity is proof that children with special needs in some language communities actually have a certain status, and may find literature adjusted to their experiences and ways of experiencing. The tension between pedagogical and aesthetical deliberations is present in all children's literature, also for children with special needs. A general ethical check-list to proof texts against unfortunate depictions is something that today would be conceived as a sign of a dated conception of the child. The existence of such a list for literature for children with special needs is therefore interesting. However, it should not be interpreted as a sign of less respect for these readers, but rather as a sign that our culture has not yet succeeded in creating a truly inclusive society, where stereotypes don't thrive.

The readings in this article show that literature of artistic ambitions can succeed in creating literary experiences for both children with special needs and others. A clearly defined ethical or pedagogical project does not have to impair the aesthetic potential. In a culture where sensation is the key to sales figures, authors should be aware not to create modern freak shows. Classical texts often show a remarkable sensitivity to this. Children with special needs are a diverse group and should have access to diverse literature that explores many aesthetical and ethical paths. As Marian Corker points out, "disability, like most dimensions of

experience is polysemic—that is ambiguous and unstable in meaning—as well as a mixture of truth and fiction that depends on *who says what, to whom, when and where*” (Goodley 2012: 276). Literature is one way of exploring this.

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