



Persistent Narratives: Intellectual Disability in Canadian Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT *Canadian children's literature rarely depicts characters labelled with intellectual disabilities, yet when it does it often remains mired in stereotypes that recycle prevalent myths and misconceptions. Even as more recent literature attempts to push back against such stereotypes, it nevertheless predominantly remains caught in these dangerous representational repertoires. This article offers a brief history of Canadian literary depictions of intellectual disability and a critique of the Canadian publishing spheres. Through a critical analysis of Lorna Schultz Nicholson's book *Fragile Bones*, we discuss the limits of representation of intellectual disability in children's fiction. We also offer a critique of the ableist publishing climate in Canada and suggest that structural barriers prevent disabled writers from entering the literary marketplace on an equal playing field. These barriers to publishing lead to the vast underrepresentation of disabled authors and the misrepresentation of disability in general and intellectual disability in particular in Canadian children's literature.*

KEYWORDS Canadian children's literature; disabled children's childhood studies; eugenic narratives; neoliberal diversity

Introduction

Canadian children's literature rarely depicts characters labelled with intellectual disabilities, yet when it does the representation often remains mired in stereotypes that marginalize disabled people and recycle prevalent myths and misconceptions about disability. Even as more recent literature attempts to push back against stereotypes with disability-centred tropes like, for example, the supercrip, the special or innocent child, the pitiable dependent or passive object of empathy, and the non-sexual being, it nevertheless ultimately remains caught in dangerous, stereotypical representational repertoires. Following a

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brief history of literary depictions of intellectual disability in Canadian children's literature, we discuss the limits of representation of intellectual disability in Canadian children's fiction through a close reading of Lorna Schultz Nicholson's novel *Fragile Bones*.¹

Fragile Bones is one of Schultz Nicholson's four novels in the One-2-One series, which offers fictionalized accounts of the Best Buddies programs that operate in high schools across Canada.² While the books seek to push back against timeworn clichés of intellectual disability, ultimately they remain entrapped within them. The pretext of a program ostensibly predicated on diversity, collaboration, and mutuality reveals how ableist eugenic narratives and myths of exceptionality and overcoming persist. We offer a critical analysis of Schultz Nicholson's (2015) novel, *Fragile Bones*, which traces the relationship between an autistic character and his academically inclined Best Buddy. Our investigation examines how race, gender, and sexuality add layers of complexity to contemporary cultural constructions of intellectual disability. Finally, we offer a critique of the ableist publishing climate in Canada and suggest that structural barriers prevent disabled writers from entering the literary marketplace in Canada on an equal playing field, which causes the vast underrepresentation of disabled authors and the misrepresentation of disability in Canadian children's literature.

This article builds on Kathy Saunders' (2004) call for children's literature to be put into conversation with disability studies and, we suggest, with disabled children's childhood studies (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014).³ Despite the rich mutual benefits that such a dialogue would offer, and recent attention to the imbrications of race, gender, sexual orientation and other axes of difference, the representation of disability in children's literature remains understudied and often problematic. Disability scholars and disabled children's childhood studies bring to children's literature a keen sense of how social attitudes and material realities shape the representation and production of

¹ Following Carlson (2015), we do not consider intellectual disability as an essentialist category and use politicizing identity-first language (i.e., disabled people) and language to acknowledge how labels are applied to people with and without their consent (i.e., labelled people). Additionally, we understand autism to be a cultural phenomenon that is socially and relationally produced (see Runswick-Cole et al., 2016). As socially constructed categories, intellectual disability and autism, and the distinctions between them, at times blur as evidenced by the inclusion of autistic youth under the umbrella of intellectual disability in the Best Buddies program (Best Buddies Canada, 2022).

² Best Buddies is a privately funded high school program that aims "to create lasting friendships between individuals with and without an intellectual or developmental disability [to] promote inclusion, acceptance, and friendship in every school and community across Canada" (Best Buddies Canada, 2022, para 2).

³ It is important to note the blurred distinctions among children's literature, middle grade readers, and young adult fiction. Schultz Nicholson lists *Fragile Bones* as both children's literature (for ages 12 and under) and young adult fiction (for ages 12-18 years). Additionally, the book has been categorized as a middle grade reader (ages 8-12 years). The content explored (e.g., family, friends, romantic crushes) in the novel strongly positions the book for a younger audience and for this reason we discuss it as children's literature.

disability tropes and furthermore how these representations reflect and reproduce cultural practices impacting labelled children.

Eugenic Narratives and Diversity Models

Children's literature provides a powerful tool for challenging the common discourse about disability (Mickenberg & Nel, 2011; Hughes & Wheeler, 2018). This potential, however, has been blunted by stereotypical representations of disability. Representations of intellectual disability in Canadian children's literature have tended to fit into commonly used tropes, such as the pitiable victim, the object of violence, the supercrip, the burden, and the non-sexual being (Dolmage, 2014; Schalk, 2017). The term supercrip emerges from the work of scholars and activists writing and theorizing in the area of disability representation (Schalk, 2016). Crip is a reclaimed word derived from the word crippled, which is used by some disability activists and scholars (Kafer, 2013). For Alison Kafer (2013), crip is "an inducement to wince" describing the "urge to shake things up, to jolt people out of their everyday understandings of bodies and minds, of normalcy and deviance" (p. 15). In this way, the word evokes a response to disability that pulls us away from deficit-based ways of understanding disability.

Supercrip has been used to describe representations of disability that focus on narratives of "overcoming, heroism, inspiration, and the extraordinary" which rely on "individual attitude, work, and perseverance rather than on social barriers" (Schalk, 2016, p. 73). This is particularly significant as this representation shapes how children come to understand difference and disability (Solis, 2004). The supercrip trope is so commonly employed that Donna Adomat (2014) notes that young readers expect, and tend to look for, supercrip tropes consistent with the literature they have encountered. As Sami Schalk (2016) notes, it is also important to acknowledge that some disabled readers are seeking "larger than life" disability representations and that inspiration has the potential to be employed in productive ways, challenging the perceived negativity of the supercrip trope (p. 75). What is essential is a consideration of the mechanisms of the narrative which produce the stereotype, the typology of the trope, and an assessment of the genre or medium in which the supercrip trope is produced (Schalk, 2016).

Within the genre of children's literature intellectually disabled characters have been excluded and marginalized. Indeed, as Abbye Meyer (2013) notes, "disability is granted acceptance and accommodation only when purely physical and when characters with disabilities prove their intelligence; there is no space within normative identities for intellectual disability" (p. 275). Moreover, Jen Scott Curwood (2013) describes this type of eugenic narrative as one in which disabled characters "must either be normalized or removed" (p. 21). This is echoed by Mark Osteen (2013), who suggests that narratives featuring autistic characters tend to follow four intertwined tropes: the autistic

character “must be a savant,” “charmingly quirky but not too severely disabled,” “must ... advance, or... measure, the moral progress of nonautistic characters,” and finally, “must experience a miraculous cure” (pp. 263-264). In short, children’s literature often demands the narratives of normative childhoods. These tropes continue to be critiqued by disabled children’s childhood studies and disability studies.

In Canadian children’s literature there are few examples of intellectually disabled characters which do not follow the narrative tropes described above. For example, in the 2012 novel *Maxed Out* by Daphne Greer, Duncan, Max’s younger intellectually disabled brother, brings the family to the boiling point as they struggle with an unexpected death: Duncan accidentally starts a fire. This action results in a call to the Kids Help Phone which immediately provides Duncan with access to resources, including a support worker. Through this charity-based response to intellectual disability and a family crisis, Max learns that it is okay to ask for help. In *Camp Outlook*, the 2014 novel by Brenda Baker, Shannon is sent to camp as her family grieves the birth of a disabled child. At camp she experiences a series of mysterious events involving intellectually disabled campers and resident artist Lori, which teaches her that her new disabled baby brother has “the power to bring out the best in the people” (p. 227). Shannon discovers Lori has Down Syndrome and when she questions why no one mentioned Lori’s disability, she is told that Lori is such a fabulous painter “people don’t notice her disability” (p. 224). In this way, Lori proves her worth through her artistic ability while simultaneously advancing Shannon’s moral development.

These examples evidence that while the inclusion of disability within children’s literature challenges the “cultural adherence to ideas of the normalized body” (Mickenberg & Nel, 2011, p. 465), it is often framed through what Schalk (2017) refers to as the neoliberal model of diversity. Diversity is understood to be a needed element within children’s literature, yet as Sara Ahmed (2012) reminds us, diversity is a buzzword for which there is no agreed-upon meaning and commonly held definitions tend to be vague. This lack of confirmed meaning acts as a conjuring trick in which diversity is left open for multiple and fluctuating interpretations. Schalk (2017) positions this buzzword within neoliberalism, which as Goodley and colleagues (2014) assert, “provides an ecosystem for ableism” to flourish (p. 981). In other words, a neoliberal diversity model tends to operate paradoxically in that it understands diversity as a needed aspect of children’s literature while simultaneously upholding ableist tropes and eugenic narratives that undermine disability representation.

Within a neoliberal diversity model, specific notions of empowerment are celebrated, necessarily excluding the more “uncomfortable, and troubling aspects of disability” (Schalk, 2017, p. 178). This positions some stories as too difficult (Collins, 2015). Indeed, in children’s literature and in childhood studies (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014) the inclusion of diversity still bends towards normalcy. As Lennard Davis (2011) notes, the function of a diversity

model is to conceal inequality as disability represents human vulnerability conflicting with the projection of the neoliberal subject and normative framings of childhood development (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014). In other words, disability appears within a neoliberal diversity model as decontextualized, depoliticized, and dehistoricized. This folding of disability into neoliberalism, referred to as inclusionism, undermines the potential of diversity through merely tolerating disability (Mitchell et al., 2014).

Persistent Narratives: An Analysis of Schultz Nicholson's *Fragile Bones*

While negligible criticism exists of disability in children's literature, literary criticism that attends to intellectual disability is especially sparse. There is an almost exclusive focus in the critical literature on the depiction of physical disabilities, and this is matched by overwhelmingly limited and questionable literary representations of intellectual disability, which, as Meyer (2013) rightly maintains, is depicted as the other in contemporary adolescent novels. Jenny Kendrick (2004) concurs, arguing that labelled characters, including those with autism, are problematically constructed in children's literature, and often only allowed to exist as "carriers of [disability-weighted] significance." In other words, disabled characters are not allowed to "signify in their own right – to be human" (par. 4).

In reflecting on the real limits that thwart the representation of characters with learning disabilities in children's fiction, we focus our attention on *Fragile Bones*, the first novel in Schultz Nicholson's One-2-One series. We uncover how ableist, eugenic narratives and myths of exceptionality and overcoming persist, despite its use of a plot device of a school program ostensibly predicated on diversity, collaboration, and mutuality. In this novel, the pairing of a disabled with a non-disabled character – Harrison and Anna respectively – brings into stark relief how the latter achieves autonomy and agency at the expense of the former. Harrison, the autistic character, is given no room to express or exert any kind of sexual agency, which is perhaps not surprising given that "people with intellectual disabilities are perceived to be 'potential victims' or are expected to express 'unacceptable sexual behaviors'" (Noonan & Gomez, 2011, as cited in Santinele Martino, 2020, p. 2). Nor does Schultz Nicholson offer a narrative perspective from which to problematize such lack of agency for disabled people.

Schultz Nicholson's series comprises four novels. Each novel interweaves the narrative voices of a disabled and nondisabled teen paired together in a high school Best Buddies program. A real-life equivalent of the program operates in Canadian high schools, and each of the novels includes a preface explaining that it finds its inspiration in the Best Buddies initiative, "a real program that operates in schools, including colleges, all over the world." The explanatory note goes on to add, "students with intellectual disabilities pair up with

volunteer peer 'Buddies.' They meet together, one-to-one at least monthly to engage in fun social interaction" (Schultz Nicholson, 2015, n.p.).

While the two protagonists are brought together under the auspices of the Best Buddies program, neither its ableist assumptions nor the problems with its neoliberal diversity agenda are put under scrutiny; instead, the program is upheld by Schultz Nicholson's story as a kind of paragon of inclusivity. Meanwhile, in real life, a valid critique has been mounted of the program for its failure to give disabled people the right to control whom they spend their time with, interact with, and form friendships with, and its foreclosure on solidarity and community between disabled people (Crabb, 2019). Additionally, such programs have been critiqued for the moral authority and do-gooder sentiments that they provide nondisabled folks (Crabb, 2019).

Fragile Bones celebrates Harrison's involvement in the Best Buddies program in neoliberal ableist terms of progress, success, and accomplishment. Meanwhile, Anna, the academically inclined "star student," is less interested in forming a meaningful relationship with Harrison, whom she sees as a kind of research project to be managed, and shows more interest in Justin, the attractive boy who heads up Best Buddies and whose troubling past (which pivots around a dead autistic sister) forms part of his allure. Here, the kill-or-cure narrative of the disability genre presents two options for the autistic characters: whereas Justin's sister, Faith, is killed off (which becomes the focus of another book in the series, the 2017 *Bent not Broken*), Harrison, as we will see, must be "cured" in the sense of removing or disguising his autistic behaviour.

Anna, on the other hand, gains a measure of control and agency through Best Buddies, joining the program with the view that it will "look good on my resume" (p. 20) and improve her social capital, a sentiment that is described by real life participants in Best Buddies programs (Chandler, 2014). Anna, the offspring of an ambitious mother who works overtime as a judge and an Asian American sperm donor, functions as the quintessential overachiever who needs volunteer experience to humanize and, arguably, feminize her by embodying and practicing a caregiving role.⁴ In some ways, Schultz Nicholson acknowledges the inherent limits of Anna's approach to Harrison and her ableist rush to diagnose him, as when Anna thinks "It would be all about the research" (p. 21). And yet the novel never fully addresses Anna's attempts to fix a situation or Harrison (Markotić, 2017), and thus also implicitly participates in the impulse to medicalize and pathologize Harrison, conflating disability with symptoms and refusing to critique the ableist control of Harrison's daily life.

For example, when Mrs. Beddington, the teacher who runs the Best Buddies program, describes Harrison as "high functioning" (p. 26), she gives Anna a file to read about Harrison. Of course, Harrison is given no such file to read

⁴ Although not possible in this article, there is an analysis of the novel's depiction of race to be offered, with Anna's mother's assumptions of Asian American academic acumen.

about Anna, nor is he entitled to any privacy over his medical and school records. Further, there is no discussion about what Harrison wants – not even a consideration of whether Best Buddies is something he wishes to participate in; the focus is exclusively on what Harrison’s parents and Mrs. Beddington want. As Anna reflects: “She closed the file folder and looked at me. ‘Because of his social skills he might not want to go to the dance but I think that’s the kind of thing his parents really want to get him to try for sure’” (p. 27). Schultz Nicholson fails to offer any kind of narrative intervention that suggests a critique of this approach. In fact, Anna quickly becomes complicit in this “treatment” of disability as something to be managed by nondisabled folks: “‘For sure,’ I said. ‘I’ll work on that with him.’ I would make that my first task. Mrs. Beddington smiled at me” (p. 27).

While Schultz Nicholson occasionally has her characters push back against the pathologization of disability, as when Justin objects to Anna’s proposal to “do some research and try to learn more about his type of autism” (p. 29), ultimately the book becomes mired in this pathologizing discourse: “‘Their brain works differently,’ he stated gruffly. ‘You can research but Harrison might not exhibit all of the symptoms’” (p. 29). In conforming to a neoliberal diversity model, as when Justin asserts that “they’re all individuals. And special” (p. 31), the novel ultimately refuses to normalize disability, instead reinforcing a medicalized approach whereby Harrison’s autism is treated as something to be controlled and eventually eliminated through the efforts of do-gooders and rescuer figures like Justin, Anna, and Harrison’s mother.

While the Best Buddies program operates under the auspices of integration, with Anna and Justin aspiring to corral Harrison into a friend group, ultimately it aims to further manage and remove Harrison’s “symptoms.” At home and at school, Harrison has already been taught to control his stimming and censor other “inappropriate” behaviours, such as avoiding eye contact. As he explains to the reader in the opening chapter, “I do a lot of things that are inappropriate or at least that’s what my parents are always telling me and the psychologists too” (p. 11). As readers, we learn that Harrison has been faced with a sense of lack of control over his own body and his own life that extends back into early childhood: “When I was little I had a lot of meltdowns and my mom hated it when the meltdowns happened in Walmart but I couldn’t control where we were or when it happened” (p. 41). Whereas Harrison is made to attend Best Buddies because his mother said it “would be good for me” (p. 68), Anna becomes involved almost as an act of rebellion against her overambitious and demanding mother who exerts academic pressure on Anna. Anna enjoys a sense of agency that she lacks in other spheres of her life by virtue of being in Harrison’s presence and by treating him, in essence, as a project to be successfully managed. From her relationship with Harrison, Anna derives a sense of accomplishment: “I was definitely making progress” (p. 111), she enthuses on multiple occasions.

Yet Harrison’s interactions with Anna are organized around a series of degrading ableist rules, regulations, and restrictions. He is instructed by family,

for example, to look her in the eye, to stop stimming (referred to as flapping by Schultz Nicholson), and to repress any sexual or romantic feelings (no kissing, no calling her his girlfriend, etc.) despite that the fact that Harrison states several times he is not interested in touching, kissing, or having a girlfriend (p. 15, 38, 44, 70, 100). In other words, he is given the message that his sexuality is dangerous, perverse, and inappropriate, and that he is not to express it openly. Prior to having Anna visit him, his mother lectures him on inappropriate behaviour, telling him that it would not be right for him to kiss or fondle Anna or other girls. She makes clear that it would be inappropriate to “touch her on her privates or on her breasts” (p. 39), although she does not include a discussion of consent. Meanwhile, Harrison’s nondisabled brother Joel is given no similar instruction, despite regularly interacting with girls sexually. At no point does Schultz Nicholson offer a narrative vantage point from which to critique this inequality in the brothers’ treatment; instead, the narrative appears to shore up the mother’s perspective that Harrison’s sexuality is something to be feared and repressed.

Disability scholars have named the intersection of disability and sexuality as taboo, pointing out that “the sexual and intimate lives of people with intellectual disabilities have been marked by a history of protectionism, infantilization, and paternalism” (Santinele Martino, 2020, p. 2). This eugenic history turns up in a legacy of institutionalization, sterilization, and sexual repression (Santinele Martino, 2020). Harrison is not afforded any kind of sexual agency. Instead, his family tries to exert control over his sexuality as they do over other spheres of his life. While it could be queried if this protectionism is related to Harrison’s status as a minor, it should be noted that Anna and Joel, also minors, are not subject to lectures about the inappropriate nature of sexual attraction. In short, Harrison is simultaneously treated as oversexed and asexual by his family, who tell him, for example, that he will want to kiss girls as Joel does. When Harrison admonishes, “it’s normal to want to kiss a girl,” and later insists that he has no such desire, he is told that there is something perverse about his lack of desire (p. 65).

One thinks here of how labelled people have been denied the right to intimate citizenship (Ignagni et al., 2016), which Plummer further describes as our “rights to choose what we do with our bodies, our feelings, our identities, our relationships, our eroticisms, and our representations” (Plummer, 2003, cited in Santinele Martino, 2020, p. 5). This level of control over romantic relationships and the private lives of young people with intellectual disabilities prevents the development of sexual autonomy and competency through the negated development of sexual identity (Retznik et al., 2021). Intellectually disabled people have historically been viewed as lacking sexual capital or desirability, and their sexuality has been seen as something that endangers and disrupts society, even though it is disabled people themselves, along with other marginalized people, who are more likely to be sexual victims and to be vulnerable when it comes to their sexual experience (Gill, 2015). Indeed, this level of overprotection in relation to the romantic lives and sexuality of minors

with intellectual disabilities, termed “new institutional walls,” reflects the “created communions” of organized leisure time, like in Best Buddies programs (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2004, pp. 206, 201). This kind of ableism is perpetuated in *Fragile Bones*, which does not question the assumptions behind Harrison’s mother’s lecture on inappropriate sexual behaviour, revealing how children’s literature invests in various myths and stereotypes of disabled people’s sexuality.

Whereas all the nondisabled teens in *Fragile Bones* are given license to express their sexuality in healthy ways, Harrison not only experiences intense heteronormative pressures from his family but also is taught to censor or repress any sexual feelings that might emerge. His sexuality is treated as deviant by his mother and brother, and at the same time, Harrison is infantilized by his family who treat him as if he is too innocent or childlike to be capable of having sexual capital or awareness. Harrison is also taught traditional gender notions about men’s and women’s behaviour by his brother Joel, who often purports to know what girls like (e.g., high heels) and instructs Harrison as to how to adapt his behaviour accordingly (p. 16).

The heteronormative scripts that Harrison inherits from his family confine him to hetero-romantic forms of love and traditional ideas around gender identity and roles – an all-too-common situation for people with intellectual disabilities, who are often presented with few options for doing gender. Other characters in the book also perform traditional gender roles, with Harrison’s mother serving as the figure of the sacrificial maternal caregiver in a kind of foil to Anna and her mother.

Meanwhile, the nondisabled characters become more sexually appealing by virtue of the rescuer role that they play in relation to the disabled characters. Justin is framed as more attractive and desirable as a romantic partner for Anna because of his previous role as his sister’s protector and the brooding mystery that surrounds him following her death. Here is Anna’s reflection on one of her early meetings with Justin: “The entire time I talked to him he never smiled, as if he had some deep, entrenched secret that made his entire life dark. For some weird reason, I was drawn to his dark mood and wanted to find out what it was that was bothering him so much” (p. 20-21). The mystery of what happened to Justin’s sister, Faith, who was also autistic, seems to enhance his sexual appeal, making him more attractive to Anna.

When Harrison invites Anna to dinner with his family – mainly because he is trying to follow the heteronormative dictates of his family (“Boys called girls and that’s what I had done, just like all the teens on television and like Joel” [p. 126]) – he struggles to compose himself in the aftermath of a meltdown. Part of what makes it difficult for him to regain his composure is his awareness that he lacks autonomy and control: “Everyone was always trying to get me to do things and then when I did them, they didn’t think I did” (p. 126). Harrison’s ire here is directed at the fact that he has no sense of agency in his interactions with his family; when his father tells him to breathe, it’s the instruction, the dictate itself, that seems to trigger him: “I was breathing. I had been breathing

on my own. Why did he have to tell me? I was doing it on my own until he started telling me. Why wouldn't they just let me do it on my own?" (p. 127).

The sexual pressure that Harrison is under to engage appropriately in a sexual relationship exists, furthermore, alongside the insistence that he lacks the capacity to have such a relationship. For example, his brother patronizingly reassures him before the dance, "Don't worry, Bud. You won't be kissing anyone tonight." These assumptions function to pathologize Harrison when he isn't interested in fulfilling heteronormative expectations, as well as to exclude him from the possibility of such interactions. As his friend Alan tells Harrison after Harrison reiterates his disinterest, "But dude, you've got some serious issues when it comes to girls" (p. 151). To this end, Schultz Nicholson recycles the myth that intellectually disabled people have serious issues when it comes to sexuality.

Harrison's confusion in trying to ascertain what appropriate behaviour is with respect to Anna grows as the novel progresses. Harrison becomes agitated on more than one occasion because he mistakenly believes that she is his girlfriend. The conflict culminates at the Best Buddies dance, where he is supposed to learn to dance, socialize, and interact with others. Instead, he witnesses Anna and Justin in the hallway together, embracing, and flees the school. When he leaves and embarks on a bus, Anna becomes distraught, searching the city for him and eventually finding him. When Anna finds Harrison at the Science Centre, she continues to ignore his needs at the expense of her own, playing the role of the rescuer despite her research and what she knows about Harrison's needs. For example, she reaches out to touch his arm despite knowing that touch can trigger his distress signals (p. 201). While she drives him home, Harrison becomes extremely agitated to the point of convulsing and hyperventilating.

And yet, the novel ultimately upholds Anna not only as a caregiver but a rescuer. Anna's mother, following this scene, explains to Anna that "I had a boy in court today with high-functioning autism... He got caught breaking and entering because some other kids told him to do it." She continues: "He wanted friends and those kids were the only ones who would talk to him, but only because they wanted something from him. I think if someone had tried to help him, like you're helping Harrison, he might have made better choices" (p. 72). This notion of non-disabled people saving or rescuing labelled people, whose pathological behaviour would otherwise criminalize them, percolates through the entire novel, ultimately setting up Anna, and to an extent Justin, as heroic figures.

In the final pages of the story Harrison imagines how he might fit within conventional, heteronormative behaviour. He is at the Science Centre again, this time with Justin, Anna, and his friend Alan. Harrison thinks: "Maybe one day I will want a girl to kiss me" (p. 217). There is no attempt to depict sexuality in creative ways. Moreover, while Harrison's expanded circle of friends is celebrated as a triumph, the novel continues to depict him as an outsider, while Anna's ability to forge friendships and a heterosexual

relationship are held up and implicitly juxtaposed with Harrison's struggles in this regard. *Fragile Bones* ultimately supports Meyer's (2013) thesis that adolescent novels that treat disability "struggle to permit normalization, pride, and empowerment for people with intellectual disabilities" (par. 5).

Here it must be acknowledged, too, that Harrison's high-functioning autism, while fitting within the category of intellectual disability, also allows him to play the role of the supercrip and thus pushes up against some of the limits normally faced by intellectually disabled characters. The narrative mechanism in *Fragile Bones* produces the typology of a regular supercrip in that Harrison is engaged in mundane teen activities, such as joining a school club, being interested in science, and going with friends to the Science Centre, yet these everyday activities are presented as exceptional (Schalk, 2016). Indeed, the tropes found in *Fragile Bones* rather predictably follow Osteen's (2013) tropes, specifically two of his four rules for autistic narratives: "the autistic person must be a savant," and "the autistic person must ... advance, or ... measure, the moral progress of nonautistic characters" (p. 263-264). While we have already established the unfolding of the narrative purpose of the disabled person as a tool of moral progress for nondisabled characters as evidenced by how Harrison functions simply to establish Anna's conduct as caregiver, we will now discuss how the narrative of the autistic person as savant operates in the book.

Given Harrison's advanced scientific understanding – he is a genius at understanding anatomy and physiology, and this forms the basis of his connection to Anna who is planning a career in medicine – we must ask: to what extent does Schultz Nicholson attempt to normalize Harrison by demonstrating that he is smart and therefore worthy of acceptance? There is an undercurrent of ableism at work in the novel's choice to elevate Harrison's advanced scientific understanding as the basis for his eventual acceptance and inclusion. What comes to mind, in addition to Malcolm Matthew's (2019) notion of an "autistic aesthetic" of the white and masculine autistic person, is a larger trend in children's literature of almost exclusively white, male protagonists who prove their worth through their intelligence in a niche field, usually a traditionally male-dominated field such as medicine or technology.

In the final scene of *Fragile Bones*, Harrison, who aspires to be a doctor, visits the Science Centre with his three friends and assesses and praises his own progress in the friendship department. In a sense, however, Harrison's moral and social worth are proven through his intelligence: Justin and Anna admire and appreciate Harrison for his textbook memory of human anatomy, among other things. It's through proving his intelligence that the novel allows Harrison to eventually feel normal and be respected by his peers.

Through the friendship that Harrison builds with Anna and Justin, he is taught how to appear more normal in an ableist society that would have him disguise or eradicate his difference rather than change its own oppressive structures. If nondisabled and disabled teens like Anna, Justin, and Harrison are simply friends, however, then there is no need to do the work of dismantling

those structures. In other words, rather than question the hegemony of normalcy, Schultz Nicholson uses disability as a form of inspiration, something that is a much broader problem found in children's literature that explores themes of disability. Readers are meant to feel inspired by Harrison's progress rather than to question the norms that made that progress apparently necessary.

Intellectual Disability in Canadian Publishing

The ableism and intersecting issues we examine in *Fragile Bones* have their roots in both a lack of consultation with disabled people by nondisabled writers and a lack of literary production by disabled authors. According to a recent survey by the *Toronto Star*, "disabled children are one of the most poorly represented groups in Canadian books – with just under two per cent of characters in picture, middle-grade and young adult books having a visible disability" (Dundas, 2020, par. 1). A mere six percent of Canadian picture, middle-grade, and young adult books depict characters with a learning disability (Dundas, 2020, par. 12). And yet, roughly 22% of adults in Canada have a disability.

If disability representation in children's literature is to move beyond the tragedy trope and inspiration porn to include more nuanced perspectives, children and young people will need access to Canadian fiction by disabled authors. This matter of representation is inextricably tied to publishing conditions for disabled authors, who face structural barriers in light of the gatekeeping mechanisms that define the publishing industry. In the U.S. context, Margaret Kingsbury (2021) has identified some of these barriers, which are significantly more challenging for writers who are multiply marginalized, such as LGBTQ2S+ and Black or Indigenous writers: discriminatory practices that make it difficult for disabled writers to break into the publishing industry, rejection by non-disabled publishing gatekeepers for not following stereotypical story arcs, and lack of access to writing conferences, among others. Indeed, in a conversation between authors Jean Little and Beverley Brenna, Little, a blind author, describes her agent's request that she write less issue books (Brenna, 2009). In other words, disability as diversity is tolerated but is not considered the basis of a publishing career.

There are, of course, books that have achieved acclaim in North American publishing. For example, the 2006 coming-of-age novel, *Accidents of Nature*, written by disabled lawyer Harriet McBryde Johnson, won the Best Books for Young Adults award from the American Library Association. The novel, set at Camp Courage in the 1970s, follows Jean, a young adult with cerebral palsy, as she begins to understand disability rights. The novel culminates in Jean questioning and challenging normalcy through the forging of a strong sense of collective disabled identity, but the intellectually disabled characters are referred to as "toddler"-like (p. 219). The 2010 novel, *Free as a Bird*, by Gina McMurchy-Barber was short-listed for several awards, including the 2010

Governor General's Award for Children's Literature. McMurchy-Barber's novel, inspired by her intellectually disabled sister and her experience working at Woodlands Institution, features intellectually disabled protagonist, Ruby Jean Sharp, who lives at Woodlands. The novel plays with the supercrip trope, presenting Ruby Jean as extraordinary for knowing how to make toast, and yet, after years of abuse and neglect within the institution, the act of making toast is an extraordinary feat. Throughout the novel, Ruby Jean's intelligence is praised: she has "more going on in that head of hers than she let on" (McMurchy-Barber, 2010, p. 37). While there are critiques of both novels, lived and personal experiences with disability, communities, and histories support the development of literature which offers children and young adult readers a glimpse of nuanced narratives in which disability is contextualized, politicized, and historicized as opposed to merely tolerated through neoliberal models of diversity.

Conclusion

If children's literature is to provide a powerful tool for challenging hegemonic discourses about disability and childhoods, then the publishing industry must be able to move beyond diversity as a buzzword and make space for disabled writers, including intellectually disabled writers and autistic writers. What is required is a willingness to embrace works that use diversity not as a model to conceal inequality under the name of inclusionism (Schalk, 2017), but to challenge ableist structures predicated on normativity. What is also needed is a model that is not complicit in the othering of intellectual disability, but that critiques the hegemony of normalcy rather than trying to make intellectually disabled characters more normal and thereby included. In short, Schultz Nicholson's novels need to empower their disabled characters without a concomitant demand for conformity to ableist expectations. In the case of Harrison, perhaps, instead of one or two nondisabled friends like Anna and Justin, he needs solidarity and community with other disabled people and nondisabled allies who push against such expectations rather than impose them.

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