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Signifying Something:
Images of Learning Disability in Fiction for Children

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It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.
Macbeth Act V: Scene v

This quotation from Macbeth provided William Faulkner with the title for his groundbreaking novel The Sound and the Fury (1931), in which three brothers - one of who, Benjy, has learning difficulties - mediate their own existential perspectives on the family. Far from signifying nothing, Benjy's "sound and fury" represent his uncomprehending distress at the disappearance of the sister whom he loves, and the search he has made for her all his adult life. Benjy's stream-of-consciousness clearly shows his appreciation of the aspects of life he is interested in, his lack of understanding in other areas and his desire and inability to communicate. In Faulkner's novel, other characters also demonstrate a "sound and fury", fail to understand or to care about one another and display a self-centredness far outweighing any lack in Benjy's character.

When Faulkner was writing, the rights of people with learning difficulties were largely ignored, but in the latter half of the century, segregation and integration have become key issues in both American and British society: in the UK, discrimination on the grounds of race or gender has been foregrounded by the feminist movement and organisations such as the Commission for Racial Equality, although the acquisition of rights for people with disabilities has been slower in coming. Crucial to the move from segregation to integration is the evolution of a voice, because a voice implies significance: something to say, and a position from which to say it. For people with learning or communication difficulties, the development of a voice is particularly difficult, and it is to Faulkner's credit that he allows Benjy to communicate with the reader, despite his evident difficulties in communicating with other characters within the interplay of the text.

The focus of the present study is the narrow area of problem fiction for children that includes a character with global developmental delay (e.g. moderate or severe learning difficulties with the exception of congenital organic specific learning disabilities).
learning difficulties, autistic spectrum disorder - not the specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia that affect children who are otherwise within the typical range of ability). It is an area of fiction, which has its particular challenges: the difficulty of fair and realistic presentation, for example, and the exposition of limited thought or speech. In its construction of Benjy, Faulkner's novel gives a character with learning difficulties an equal opportunity to present a view, to be a focaliser, to have a voice and with it, to give, and have, significance.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to consider the construction of characters with learning difficulties in children's literature and to discover how far children's literature has allowed characters with learning difficulties not only to be carriers of significance, but also to signify in their own right - to be human.

The material I collected, and which appears at the end as a bibliography, has all been published in the last 40 or so years (the earlier years of the last century being as yet unrepresented); some texts were discovered as a result of reading and research and others more serendipitously. The earliest text I found is by an Australian writer, Ivan Southall, who included a character with some learning difficulties in his first novel, *Hill's End* (1961). The most recent is a British book, Jeanne Willis's *Naked Without a Hat* (2003), a rather romantic novel in which (in true Agatha Christie style) a key piece of information is withheld from readers and from other characters until late in the action. Excluded are information books and fictionalised lifestyle texts, such as *I'm Louise* (1986) by Anne Rooke, which are factual rather than fictional, and do not offer the scope for development that a novel may be able to provide its protagonists.

In its most simplistic form, children's literature can display a tendency to construct the world in polarities: good and evil, for example, adult and child, boy and girl or school and home; one polarity of each pair often remaining unexplored or stereotypical, perhaps in carnivalesque "time out" fashion, or because of gendered construction. Taking the opposition "typical child and child with learning difficulties," it is possible to divide the texts considered into those which have a simplistic, stereotyped approach and those which attempt a more complex examination of character and of the dynamics of development and relationship.

At one end of the spectrum are books in which the character with learning difficulties is not allowed to evolve at all, and is merely a vehicle for the development of the other child or children. *The October Child* (1976) by Eleanor Spence and Jill Paton Walsh's *Unleaving* (1976) are extreme examples, in which the young characters with learning difficulties, in the former, an autistic child named Carl and in the latter, Molly, a little girl with Down syndrome, are not only the sketchiest of stereotypes, but demonised as well. Also at this end of the scale are the many "caring" narratives, such as Elizabeth Laird's *Red Sky in the Morning* (1988) and *Boss of the Pool* (1986) by Robin Klein, in which the focaliser becomes a better person because of his or her circumstances, although the catalyst could indeed have been any crisis, since the character with learning difficulties is only superficially presented.

On the cusp are two somewhat overlapping types of narrative: one in which a sibling or friend (who is the focaliser) is able to develop some understanding of the thinking of the special needs character, such as Bill Gillham's *My Brother, Barry* (1981) and *I Own the Racecourse* (1968) by Patricia Wrightson; the second in which all the characters are presented as having their various difficulties to overcome, for example, Betsy Byars' *The Summer of the Swans* (1970) and *Gideon Ahoy!* (1987) by William Mayne.

At the other end of the scale, and as yet few and far-between, are those narratives which give a voice and agency to characters with disabilities. There are a small number of picture books, for example those published by Albert Whitman, such as *Thumbs Up, Rico!* (1995) by Maria Testa, which make the character with learning difficulties the focaliser in a manner far removed from archetypal "goodies" and "badies"...
difficulties the focaliser or narrator. In terms of novels, few apart from Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) which won the Whitbread Novel Award for 2004, Mark Roberts' *Night Riders* (2001) and Jeanne Willis's novel, *Naked Without a Hat*, as yet fulfill the criteria, although writers such as Rosemary Sutcliff, Jane Stemp, Morris Gleitzman and Jack Gantos have given agency and focalisation to characters with physical and sensory disabilities, mutism and ADHD.

Issue-driven fiction, perhaps inevitably, tends to the didactic, pedagogic and moralistic, and because of that might be expected, to some degree at least, to reflect the changing perspectives and political ideologies of society at large. However, despite my supposition that earlier books might be expected to be the least acceptable to modern eyes and later books more empathetic and "politically correct", comparing the texts by decade proved to be problematic. The narratives by no means follow this rule and are variable in ideological stance, indicating perhaps, that the attitude of the writer towards his or her characters, and towards people with learning difficulties, will present as the determining factor in the mediation of a discourse of inclusion or exclusion.

In *Disability in Modern Children's Fiction* (1985), Quicke posits integration into mainstream society for people with disabilities as a measure of their acceptability and beyond that, as a measure of their humanity, achieved if "we", by which he presumably means people without disabilities,

> can sense the potential in that person for achieving self-respect, for giving and receiving affection and for developing some understanding of the nature of community life - its rules and values. (p. 12)

The implications of this view are several and are distorted by the conflation of the separate issues of recognition of humanity and of integration into society. Quicke implies a belief that recognition as a human being is not automatic, but is dependent on the acknowledgement of the social group, which immediately begs the question: if not human, then what? In fiction, animal metaphors are employed, often dogs, but also creatures such as elephants and seals. Interestingly, such motifs are used across the range of texts, appearing in novels that are otherwise "politically correct" and give the character with special needs a human role to play, such as *Gideon Ahoy!* in which Gideon is compared to a dog, because he "sensed something was different" (p. 10). Less appropriate references to animals may be somewhat insensitive, as in *Horse* (1982), by Jane Gardam, in which a character called Silly Betty claps her hands "like a floppy seal" (p. 32).

Quicke considers the "notion of disabled people being non-human, and more like animals or vegetables" (p. 3) to be out-dated, but argues that integration into society or segregation from it is likely to be based on an external, societal view that the person will have achieved more than a "certain level of humanity" (p. 13), presumably defined as above. For Quicke, integration appears to be a validation of humanity, a measure of society's belief in and acceptance of the humanity of its members with disabilities. However, the notion of humanity and the development of an integrated society are philosophically very different ideas, and for a social group to question the humanity of some of its members is quite different from the issue of the group's commitment to free access to its activities. Confusing the issues of humanity and of integration conflates the philosophical and the pragmatic: how a group decides that its members qualify for human status differs from the practical efforts made by the group to enable all of its members to join in.

In *The Final Journey* (1996), Gudrun Pausewang perhaps unconsciously demonstrates this ambivalence towards people with learning difficulties: Ernstl, probably a man with Down's syndrome, is included in the section of humanity dehumanised and pursued to death by the Nazi regime, but is characterised by Pausewang as being "plump as a maggot" (p. 136) and therefore, presumably, a parasite on the sisters who have cared for him. On one level, Pausewang clearly
parasite on the sisters who have cared for him. On one level, Pausewang clearly acknowledges Ernstl as human because she includes him in the group of people being unjustly and unjustifiably denied human status; on another level, she betrays the common prejudice of society at large against those of its members perceived to be uneconomic and a "burden" on those who care for them.

It is possible to argue that an overemphasis on integration may operate against the interests of people being thus integrated, because the responsibility and the power remain with the larger group, and the individual does not necessarily gain the power of choice. Within the universal set of society at large, social groups construct and reconstruct themselves in an infinite and infinitely variable interlocking pattern, and people access social groups by preference or need as well as by default. Modern society, at least in the UK, acknowledges a responsibility to promote equal access for all; whether it acknowledges the rights of all its members, including people with disabilities, to exercise individual choice or agency is another issue entirely. Commenting on the portrayal of characters with disabilities in children's literature, Pinsent (1997) makes it clear that not only do people with disabilities "have the right to be accepted for themselves as individuals, and to be autonomous" but that they should also have the opportunity in reading to identify, or not as they choose, with a representative range of characters with and without disabilities (p. 124).

These narratives vary considerably in their presentation of agency. In Spence's *The October Child*, agency is denied to most of the characters, the action apparently being overtaken by the overpowering demands of an autistic child, but also in fact being driven by the need of the parents to find what they consider to be an appropriate educational setting for him. Laird, in *Red Sky in the Morning*, subsumes agency into self-help skills: useful for the character with special needs to learn, but normative in the sense of producing behaviour acceptable to society (and therefore validating to the individual only in the manner Quicke advocates) rather than promoting independent choice for the individual.

William Mayne in *Gideon Ahoy!* and Rachel Anderson in "Micky" (in *The Bus People*, 1989) both investigate the possibility of agency for young men growing up with learning difficulties. Mayne concentrates on work as a validating measure of adulthood, reaching a compromised conclusion, since Gideon proves both able and unable to manage in the working environment. Anderson looks at the issues of developing sexuality and leaving home, in a poignant short story in which Micky's emotional development is not matched by sufficient physical development to enable him to gain access to the freedom of choice and action he desperately desires.

Agency for younger characters, particularly those portrayed in sibling narratives, can be assessed by comparing their potential for choice to that of their siblings or friends. Geraldine, for example, in Marlene Fanta Shyer's *Welcome Home, Jellybean* (1981) moves from a complete lack of agency through a period of misdirected attempts at joining in family life to the beginnings of a more positive relationship based on the developing understanding of her family, and their growing acceptance of her attempts to integrate herself. Geraldine's difficulties and her evolving selfhood are paralleled by her brother's uneasy attempts to integrate himself at school and to cope with his own social and pubertal crises. In *The Summer of the Swans*, Betsy Byars also allows the development of Charlie, brain-damaged following an illness at age three, to be mirrored by the development of his siblings: The motif of losing one's way and then finding purpose operates in each of the main characters' lives. Although other characters construct Charlie as being lost or having run away, in fact he sets out on his first independent journey, and while he needs help to be found, he also finds for himself, however limited these may be judged as being, a voice and a connection to people he loves.

Two recent novels, *Calling a Dead Man* (2001) by Gillian Cross and Jeanne Willis's
Naked Without a Hat, attempt the task of portraying agency with varying results. Cross includes two characters with disabilities -- though neither is the focaliser -- one a strong-minded young woman with physical disabilities, the other a middle-aged woman with Down syndrome. Despite the disability-conscious tone of the text, Cross remains ambivalent about characters with learning difficulties. Frosya is the only young person left in a Russian village, and as such minds goats, chops wood and fetches and carries for her elders: her Down syndrome is no barrier to her ability to assist. However, as in so many other novels, once this "child-woman" (p. 147) seems to have fallen in love, her death is inevitable, and the implications of love and desire for a character with learning difficulties remain unexplored.

Jeanne Willis's first-person narrative, Naked Without a Hat, explores leaving home, falling in love and first sexual experience, within the context of learning difficulties, and as such deserves praise. Whilst the realistic elements of the text work well, as when Willis contrasts the notion of agency for the individual against the desire of the carer to control and to protect, the more fantastical components (such as eloping with a Romany girl) are a little less convincing. Deservedly short-listed for the Whitbread Children's Award, however, the judges found it:

A quirky love story, which combines wit and originality with a wise refusal to let people be pigeonholed. It is funny, beautifully written and constantly surprising


Closely linked to agency is the construction of character. Quicke identifies four key points in the portrayal of a protagonist with special needs, focusing on: appropriate physical description; accurate representation of behaviour; the inner world which gives the behaviour meaning; and romanticism and stereotyping (pp. 155-6).

In the books under discussion here, physical appearance is treated in a variety of ways. Ann M. Martin in Kristy and the Secret of Susan (1990), number 32 in the Babysitters Club series, describes Susan, an autistic-savant, as "beautiful," a child who "could be a model" (pp. 32-3). Susan can also play the piano, so although she cannot communicate and has learning difficulties, she is presented as outstandingly physically and aesthetically beautiful, thus externalising her value into function and facade, and denying her intrinsic value. It may be that Martin, in resisting the impulse to reflect Susan's learning difficulties in her appearance (an impulse Jill Paton Walsh does not resist), and in her apparent desire to find some positive attributes for the character of Susan, presents an idealised physical beauty as a substitute for the human qualities she seems unable to give her character.

At the other end of the scale, in Jill Paton Walsh's Unleaving, Madge, the focaliser, "sickens" when she meets Molly, who squints, dribbles, is "lumpish" and is frequently described by the narrator as "it" rather than "she" (pp. 27-8). Even worse, Molly, alone amongst her family, has a "shock of red hair," symbolic of the hell which her presence in the family has created. A careful reading of the passage, however, reveals that Molly's behaviour varies little from that of any young child: she responds, even if only in single words, she smiles and chuckles, plays and dances, and co-operates in picking flowers and finding a jam-jar. Despite this positive and rather ordinary conduct, the reader is unlikely to be able to resist the narrator's condemnatory stance and take a balanced view of Molly.

In Welcome Home, Jellybean, Fanta Shyer seems to achieve the appropriate level of acknowledgement of visual difference and similarity for Geraldine:

Sometimes, between words, Gerri forgets to close her mouth and just leaves it open. That's when she looks all wrong and funny; otherwise, when her hair is combed right, she looks pretty much like every other kid and a lot prettier than some of the girls in my class. Her top teeth are crooked, but mine were too, until I got braces... (p. 16)
Gerri is rather ordinary in appearance, although she "has her own peculiarities" remarks Quicke, citing this passage, "but then most children do" (p. 155); more than that, however, Gerri looks like Neil, her brother and the narrator of this story. Crucial to a position of prejudice may be the irrational but common emotional response that people with learning difficulties look more like each other than they resemble their families, and may therefore be a species apart. Walsh betrays this attitude as she portrays Molly as being as physically unlike her family as she is intellectually (her father is an Oxford don and her brother a budding concert pianist).

The presentation of behaviour and its meaning or interpretation also varies widely: Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), a text which frequently appears on the GCSE syllabus (and is therefore read by fourteen and fifteen year olds), takes as its theme the gap between Lenny's intention and his performance, as does Anthony Masters' *Spinner* (1993), in which Gary, an autistic boy, attempts to find his former home and retrieve a playhouse without which he cannot be secure. Whilst the former text explores Lenny's thinking, however, the latter is largely mediated through Jane, a neighbouring teenager and self-appointed guardian to Gary; similarly, whilst in *Of Mice and Men* the plot relates directly to Lenny, in *Spinner* it forms a sub-plot to a teen adventure involving robbery and violence.

In texts that maintain a positive attitude towards the character with learning difficulties, such as *Gideon Ahoy!*, the behaviour is realistically portrayed and a rationale is developed. Gideon's behaviour and limited speech are accurately and minutely described, and the meaning of his behaviour is both directly observed and mediated through other characters, particularly his mother, sister, and employer. Although Gideon's sister, Eva, is the focalising character, Gideon's story forms the plot and Eva's position is more that of chorus or commentator. In *The October Child*, a much more negative text, Carl's behaviour is unexplained, and although the impact on the family is clearly explored, little insight is given into the internal world of a character presented as being isolated and distressed.

In this novel, as in many texts from the past, people with disabilities are portrayed not as fellow-humans but as stereotypes: in this case functioning as the evil destroyer of the family, in others being presented, for example, as victims or angels. Cumberbatch and Negrine in *Images of Disability on Television* (1992) conclude that in the contemporary visual fictional world of film and television:

> The portrayal of characters with disabilities in feature films tends to be through stereotypes, and that the most commonly used stereotypes are the disabled person as a criminal or only barely human or someone who is powerless and pathetic. (p. 137)

Haffter (1968) links the visual or behavioural difference of the baby born with special needs to the extensive folklore of the changeling, and comments particularly on pre-scientific parental rationalisation, the demonising of the child and the belief in witchcraft. The attitudes of the church, Haffter feels, further isolated the position of families including a baby with a congenital condition, linking such births to sin, the devil and offence against God, and confirming an "isolation, ostracism and even persecution" (p. 61) which many people feel continues to the present day.

In addition to visual stereotypes, children's literature may powerfully convey stereotyping discourses of behaviour. In "Take Up Thy Bed and Walk" (1992), Lois Keith, herself a wheelchair-user, defines 19th-century literature of disability as having three main stereotypical discourses:

1. Disabled people have to learn the same qualities of submissive behaviour that women have to learn: patience, cheerfulness and making the best of things;
2. That disability can be a punishment for bad
behaviour, for evil thoughts or for not being a good enough person; (3) That disability is curable. If you want to enough, if you love yourself enough, if you believe in God enough, you will get up and walk.

Greta D. Little, in “Handicapped Characters in Children's Literature: Yesterday and Today” (1986), suggests that characters with disabilities are treated differently in modern texts, being defined more by what they “can and cannot do” (their abilities) than by “what they are” (their disabilities) (p. 182). This concept, whilst a slight improvement, still fails to acknowledge characters for who they are, and to allow the presentation of people with disabilities as part of the range of human experience rather than as carriers of a specific disability-related significance.

Richard Rieser, encouraging writers and editors to avoid “handicapist stereotypes” in Invisible Children (1995), comments that it “is entirely appropriate to show disabled people as members of an average population or cast of characters” (p. 48).

There is perhaps a greater tendency to romanticise in texts about young people with physical or sensory disabilities than in those that contain characters with learning difficulties, because the characters may be easier to represent and the resolution may be more hopeful (if often unrealistic). The stereotypical and less-than-realistic closures of narratives such as What Katy Did (Coolidge, 1872) or The Secret Garden (Burnett, 1911), whose protagonists, Katy and Colin, learn to walk again, must do a disservice to the majority of people with disabilities for whom the miracle will not happen, particularly since, in Biblical fashion, the recovery is often associated with an improvement in character. It is more difficult to identify a typical closure amongst the books being discussed here, since much depends on the focus of the narrative and its discourse. Character-building and indeed, emotional development, may be largely confined to the sibling or friend as in Spinner, whilst the miraculous recovery is transmuted into a successful but more limited improvement, as in Boss of the Pool.

It is essential to acknowledge that unlike more typical narratives in which the action may represent “time out” from the normal progress of life, there is no time out from disability, and a fitting conclusion must reflect this in addition to the resolution of the plot. Byars and Mayne, particularly, employ multi-layered conclusions which appropriately reflect the desires and dependencies of the characters with learning difficulties and do not romanticise or belittle either the limited scope for action of the character with special needs or the demands placed on the family by his or her care.

Less perceptive writers appear to encode the character with special needs as primarily a signifier of disability rather than as an individual. Not only are these characters often rather clumsily stereotyped, but also they are also frequently constructed as being marginalised in relation to family structures as well as to the more obvious social structures, such as school. More discerning writers portray people with learning difficulties as the individuals they are, with a unique range of skills and needs, and with an acknowledged position within the social structure of the family. As Rieser recommends, they:

portray people with disabilities as having individual and complex personalities and capable of a full range of emotions. (p. 48)

In order to be a signifier not merely a vehicle of significance, a character with learning disabilities, like his or her real-life counterpart, has to take equal place in the cast list: to be in the plot, not isolated from it. Although there have been great developments in the last 30 years in social responsibility towards people with learning difficulties, this is by no means a new idea: During the research for this paper, I was surprised to discover an astute and compassionate article by Charles Dickens and W.H. Wills, which takes as its closing remark the same paraphrase of Shakespeare with which I opened mine. The article, entitled "idiots," was first
published in *Household Words* in 1853 (Stone, ed., 1969), and presents, although in long outmoded terms, a clear exposition of the (still conflated, particularly in the tabloids) difference between mental health problems and learning disability. In it, Dickens and Wills describe the foundation of asylums for children with learning difficulties, in which education and social training develop the skills and abilities of the inmates well beyond what was expected at the time.

Dickens and Wills conclude their article with an amended quotation from Shakespeare, expressing their hope that in the future people with learning difficulties would find voice and purpose and that *Macbeth* could be altered to read:

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It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound instruction,
Signifying something.
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Paraphrase of *Macbeth* Act V: Scene v

(Dickens and Wills in Stone, ed. p. 499)

Some of the material presented here has previously been published in conference proceedings:


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