

How are characters with additional needs and disabilities represented in Children's and Young Adult Literature?

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Abstract

Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of The Dog in the Night-time*¹ paved the way for novels with protagonists with additional needs and disabilities aimed at children and young adults. Through the publication of his book following Christopher, a teenager with Asperger's. Haddon introduced people to a different perspective raising awareness and understanding at the same time. Since its publication in 2003, many novels exploring the marginalised voices of children with additional needs and disabilities have followed suit, such as R.J. Palacio's 2012 novel *Wonder*,² Sharon M Draper's *Out of My Mind*³ in 2010 and Kim Slater's 2016 novel *A Seven Letter Word*.⁴ Through the inclusion of books such as these in classrooms and school book clubs' children are taught about inclusion, acceptance, and empathy. I explore how literature of this type serves to reveal those with additional needs and disabilities as less alien and other. I further discuss how novels with characters such as these have a place on bookshelves across the world through their ability to teach children to be full and inclusive members of their communities. While also stimulating conversation regarding additional needs, disabilities, and inclusion.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

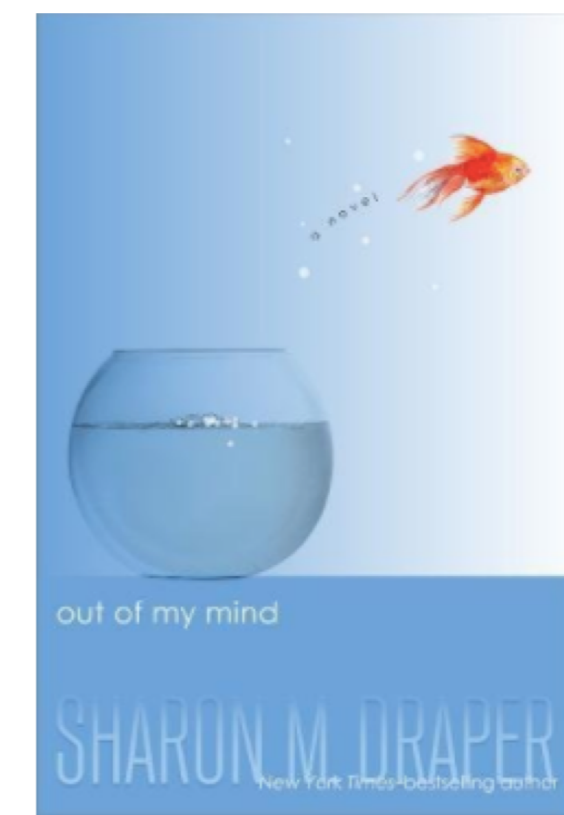


Fig. 3

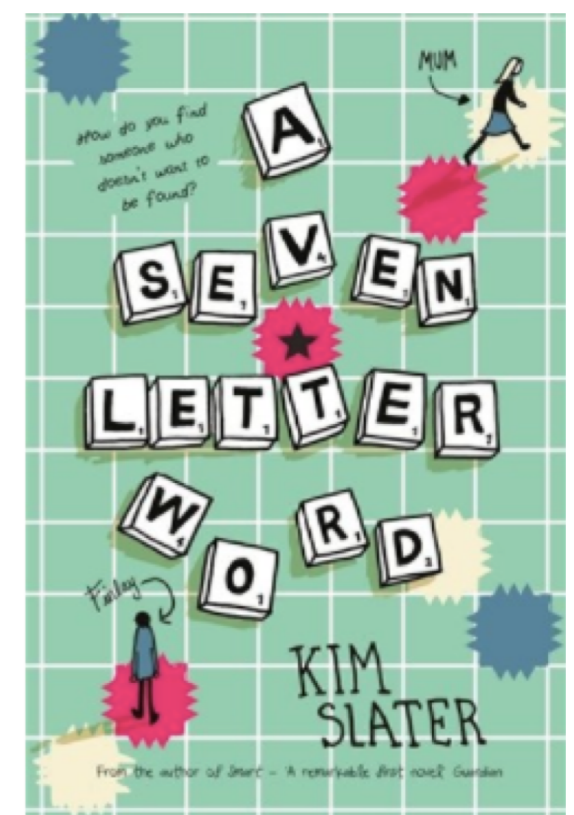


Fig. 3

Key Themes

Focusing on four key themes of **Normality**, **Intelligence**, **Attachment**, and **Perspective of Otherness**, allowed me to explore the universal desires of these four protagonists and many of their peers. These novels reveal a want to be perceived as normal through the eyes of our narrators. Along with an underestimated intelligence and maturity exhibited by these characters with additional needs and disabilities, coupled with the importance of their families and support networks in their development and the overcoming of obstacles exclusive to them and many children of their age. A perspective of otherness can be explored through the lack of disabled writers and the lack personal experience the majority of these authors have with the additional needs and disabilities included in these books. This then allows us to question the marginalisation of disabled voices in literature and in wider society.

Conclusion

These novels allow children to explore disability in a place of non-judgement and safety; they provide the starting blocks for the reader to consider how they can be more inclusive, how their communities can be more inclusive and more accessible. I explored how normality cannot be a standalone stereotype; instead what is normal for *Out of My Mind*'s Melody is entirely different to *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*'s Christopher. Along with this, these characters have a clear idea of what normal is, defining it as different to themselves, they are marginalised by themselves and their communities. Intelligence and perceived intelligence is explored in terms of how there is a constant feeling of needing to prove oneself to everyone around them including healthcare professionals and teachers; it reveals the underestimation of the intelligence of those with disabilities and additional needs. While Attachment is discussed in terms of the effect of losing a parent on a child's mental health and additional needs, but it also touches on the parental stress that can be provoked by disability and additional needs and the expectation of what a child should be. Finally, my dissertation explores perspectives of otherness, addressing the lack of disabled voices in literature and the unease authors may feel when their novels are used a teaching tool about disability. But it also explores how these novels can introduce readers to diverse perspectives, promoting empathy, kindness, and inclusion.

References

- 1 and Fig. 1 Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, (London: Vintage, 2004).
- 2 and Fig. 2 R. J Palacio, *Wonder* (London: Corgi, 2014).
- 3 and Fig 3. Sharon M Draper, *Out of My Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012).
- 4 and Fig 4. Kim Slater, *A Seven Letter Word*, (London: Macmillan, 2016).