

“I’m Not Your Inspiration”: Disability and Empathy in Young Adult Literature

Disabled bodies have long existed in the world as non-normative entities, and often, as objects of pity. In 2014 the late disability activist Stella Young gave a TEDx talk entitled, “I’m Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much”. Young argued that disabled bodies often act as “inspiration porn” for able-bodied audiences, namely in an “image of a person with a disability, often a kid, doing something completely ordinary...carrying a caption like ‘your excuse is invalid’ or ‘before you quit, try’” (ABC News). In naming disabled bodies as objects of inspiration predominantly for the able-bodied gaze (“We’re not real people. We are there to inspire.”), Young brings up an important question: are inspiration and empathy the same thing?

Extrapolating from Young’s definition of inspiration porn, this paper considers how this question applies to disabled characters in the YA novels *The Beginning of Everything* and *Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl*. Furthermore, building from the work of David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (*Narrative Prosthesis*) and Julie Passante Elman (*Chronic Youth*), I demonstrate how the depictions of disabled characters are constructed and presented as objects of inspiration to what is mostly an able-bodied audience in the aforementioned texts. Moreover, I consider how “crip lit”¹ YA texts, such as the *Unbroken* anthology, may force such an audience to reframe their approach to characters who are different from themselves. Utilizing a theoretical framework from disability, literary, and media studies, I aim to show that empathy and inspiration need not be mutually exclusive, and furthermore, that reading empathically also demands reading without a need for catharsis.

¹ Meaning works that “push up against limited notions of embodiment, resist medical pathology and demand more expansive understandings of disability” (“Crip Lit”)

Works Cited

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