“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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