Call for Papers:

Crip Kid Lit:
Critical Approaches to Disability in Children’s and Young Adult Literature and Media

Date: Friday 19 April 2024
Place: University of Cambridge, United Kingdom and Online
Deadline for Submissions EXTENDED: 15 November 2023

Confirmed Keynotes:
Prof. Dr. Maren Conrad (University of Cologne, Germany)
Dr. Ria Cheyne (Liverpool Hope University, United Kingdom)

Children’s and young adult literature plays a powerful role in both producing and challenging stereotypes, assumptions, and stigmas about disability. As a modern concept, disability is nevertheless fundamental to the moralistic cliché of injured and ill characters in ‘classic’ children’s literature, such as Tiny Tim, Katy Carr, and Colin Craven. Equally, texts for young people constitute a platform to engage with and uplift the experiences of disabled people across identities, experiences, and diagnoses. To think with “disability” — to think crip — is to engage a rhetoric of critique. It is to draw attention to, and interrogate, how health and ability operate as symbols in public life.

In 2004, Kathy Saunders suggested that scholarship on children’s literature was guilty of perpetuating a punitive model of disability. She called for children’s literature scholarship to incorporate the epistemological and methodological contributions of disability studies. As a field, disability studies is important because it challenges the conservative view of ‘disability’ as a “personalised, wholly biological and medically mediated characteristic” (n.p). Instead, disability studies locates it as “a social construction [which helps to shape] the attitudes and circumstances that are commonly found in contemporary society.” In the years since 2004, many have followed Saunders’ call: Scott Pollard’s special issue on disability in the *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* (vol. 38, no. 3, 2013), Patricia A. Dunn’s *Disabling Characters:*

In this way, the analysis of disability in texts for young people is most generative when it embraces conversations occurring across the medical humanities, including Crip Theory, a radical concept proposed by Robert McRuer (2006), to argue against the dominance of able-bodied experience as the norm. We take the name of this conference from McRuer to centre the need for provocative, disruptive, and queer-minded approaches to disability. Taking place two decades after Saunders’ article and McRuer’s introduction of Crip Theory, this small one-day symposium will provide fresh space for conversations about the representation of disability in texts for young people. We ask: what can disability studies do for children’s and young adult literature? And what can children’s and young adult literature do for disability studies?

Our symposium understands children’s literature and disability in broad terms. Texts for young people may encompass media such as film, television, videogames, or theatre, in addition to picturebooks, comics, novels, and fanwriting. Disability, like ability, is a politically nuanced and socially complex term. We use the terms disability, dis/ability, (dis)ability, disability/ability, and crip to encompass physical and cognitive disabilities, neurodivergence, mental illness, chronic illness/fatigue, temporary disabilities, etc., as well as the impact of pandemics and epidemics such as COVID-19 and HIV/AIDS. Within the disability community, it is both powerful and troublesome to split off into distinct categories or identities. Nevertheless, disability studies must incorporate diverse lenses. We encourage participants to reflect upon how these myriad of approaches to disability materialise in texts for young people.

We are excited to receive abstracts on disability in children’s and young adult literature from a variety of international cultures and perspectives, on topics such as but not limited to:

- Disability across genre and form (speculative storyworlds, problem-novels, realism, nonfiction, the canon, etc.)
- Stereotypes, tropes, and and/or counter narratives in children’s literature about disability
- Mental health and bibliotherapy
- ‘Cripistemologies’ in texts for young people
- Interrogating didactic and stylistic dimensions of disability
- Children’s and YA literature’s relationship to pan-/epidemics (e.g. HIV/AIDS, COVID-19, etc.)
- Fan cultures, social media, and disability
- Reading disability in concert with other critical lenses (including, but not limited to, Queer Theory, Critical Race Theory, Gender Studies, Intersectionality, Decoloniality, Posthumanism, and Ecocriticism)
- Personal experiences of disabled discourse in children’s and YA literature, whether among authors, illustrators, editors, other producers, or readers

The list provided is not exhaustive. We recognise that many within the disability community are faced with the stigma of not being considered – or not considering themselves – ‘disabled enough’ or ‘disabled in the right way’ to partake. We welcome both scholars who identify as disabled or abled to submit proposals engaging with disability scholarship in children’s literature.

We are seeking 15-minute presentations or the option of poster submissions to be displayed at the conference. Please send an abstract of 250-300 words, including up to five keywords, and an author biography of no more than 100 words in a separate document. Both documents should be submitted as .DOCX files. **The deadline for submissions has been extended to 15 November 2023.** The email address is: cripkidlit@gmail.com. Please let us know in the email if you provisionally plan to attend in-person or online.

This small, one-day symposium will be a hybrid conference where participants can attend in-person at the University of Cambridge, UK or online. All events will be synchronously streamed via Zoom and recordings made accessible for all participants for a limited period after the conference. It is our hope that this conference will be as accessible as possible; details regarding this will be provided as they are confirmed. If you have further questions about the accessibility of the conference, please do reach out.

For updates, follow us on:
X (formerly known as Twitter) @cripkidlit
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