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The Ambiguities of Inclusion: Disability in Contemporary Literature

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It is arguable that no period in history has seen greater understanding of, and support for, people with disabilities than the contemporary. In Europe and North America in particular, the civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s that transformed social acceptance of race and gender identities laid the base and provided momentum for similar developments within disability communities in the 1970s and 1980s. Activists for Independent Living and other disability rights gave visibility to those with disabilities in ways that had not existed before, and advocated for substantial changes in law to protect rights, while many governments enacted legislation (the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act in the United States; the 1995 UK Disability Discrimination Act, for instance) that spoke for those with disabilities when before they had often been explicitly marginalized and excluded. In the literary and cultural spheres, the rise of new publishing outlets focused on disability titles (such as Jessica Kingsley in the UK) and the popularity of memoirs from the 1990s onwards created both the space to articulate disability experience and an audience – both disabled and not – for those stories. Novels and plays featuring protagonists with disabilities or disability-focused themes and topics have never been more prevalent.

And yet for all of these changes, there is still a real sense that, within majority social and cultural constructions of citizenship, narrative or community, people with disabilities are still subject to misrepresentation and prejudice, still patronized, feared, or relegated to the margins. Lennard J. Davis, whose work on normalcy is referenced in the Introduction to this volume, has argued in his more recent writing that the idea of the normal as a social yardstick has been replaced by a concept of diversity, where ideas of which kinds of subjects are now included in civil society are framed within value judgments made around readings of

“positive” diversity. As Davis notes, however, even while it might be expected that disability is precisely the kind of diversity that it might be assumed will be valued within such schema, it is still all too common that those with disabilities fall outside the parameters created by these particular versions of inclusion. Disabled difference, it appears, is not frequently seen to be the kind of difference that societies value.¹

This essay will explore the ways in which post-1945 writing has captured, reflected, and perpetuated this ambiguity, noting the ways in which literary cultures have been striving for openness and inclusion yet frequently produce stories that reduce the lived experience of disability through simplistic and stereotypical symbols and structures. It will use examples from a range of Anglo-American writers, and – overlapping with a number of other pieces in this volume – also consider the context of disability autobiography, fiction by writers who self-identify as disabled, and popular fiction. The essay will discuss questions of agency, metaphor, narrative form, technology, the disabled hero, and the rise of the “neuronovel,” all during a period in which everyday life has been increasingly medicalized. It will conclude by highlighting the precarious nature of disability in contemporary writing, emphasized and explored as never before, but still often contained within frames of sentimentality and melodrama in particular.

As Michael Davidson points out in his essay in this Companion, disability in modernist literature and culture was seen through the lenses of developing technologies in both the social and scientific realms. Medical knowledge shaped new ideas of psychiatry, psychology, and surgery that reconfigured understandings of mental and physical health, and the social sciences reworked ideas of “the human” that, for all of their productive consequences, also created the eugenic movements of the modern period. In literary texts, modernists focused on the difference such changes brought: the postwar trauma of Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) outlined ideas of psychological damage;

Clifford Chatterley's wheelchair in D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) symbolized that character's impotence, sterility, and absence of passion; while William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) presented arguably the most complex representation of disability in modernist writing, with the portrayal of Benjy Compson's learning disabilities in particular represented in innovative combinations of language and form that sought to display a profound psychological interiority.

The transition between modern and contemporary writing was in fact saturated with disability contexts. World War II had not only created disabilities in millions of people, it had also emphasized the idea of "broken" societies, especially in Europe, traumatized by a war that had reduced lives and communities to rubble. The onset of the nuclear age promised further devastation, and the growing awareness of the specific disabilities that would be produced by radiation came to haunt much literary production as the 1940s turned into the 1950s. Samuel Beckett's work of the period offers the most comprehensive depiction of how this idea of disability was built into the structures of literary narrative. It can be argued that in a very real sense all of Beckett's characters are disabled as all seem caught in contexts in which both physical and cognitive activities appear restricted. This is true of those figures who are physically trapped in his drama, such as Hamm in *Endgame* (1957), who is unable to move or leave his chair for the whole of that play, Winnie "embedded" up to her waist at the opening of *Happy Days* (1961) (and then, in Act Two, up to her neck), or the central unnamed protagonist in *Act Without Words* (1957) who, despite all his efforts, is unable to leave the stage, being continually flung back as he tries to exit. Even Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* (1952), Beckett's most famous play, are subjected to such restrictions, unable to abandon their seemingly endless hiatus, stuck on pause and committed to repeat their present in a manner reminiscent of anterograde amnesia.

The presentation of such evident disability is even more true of Beckett's characters who have physical impairments, such as both Molloy and Moran, the central figures in his 1951 novel *Molloy*, a text in which the idea of a forward trajectory implicit in a journey is offset by an ongoing process of disablement. Molloy, a vagrant who sets out to find his mother at the start of the novel, is incapacitated by leg pain that continues as his journey develops. Carrying crutches as well as pushing a bicycle, Molloy notes that: "My two legs are as stiff as a life-sentence," and that "my progress, slow and painful at all times, was more so than ever, because of my short stiff leg."² Molloy's feeling that his legs are "shortening" creates a literal lack of balance in his sense of self: "For the suffering of the leg at rest was constant and monotonous. Whereas the leg condemned to the increase of pain inflicted by work knew the decrease of work dispensed by work suspended, the space of an instant" (72). All progress is "slow and painful," Molloy observes, and here his disability powers the classic Beckettian capture of contradiction within a character's speaking voice: "Yes, my progress reduced me to stopping more and more often, it was the only way to progress, to stop" (72-3). As he goes on, Molloy's body continues to fall apart.

By the end of his section of the novel, Molloy is reduced to a figure "flat on my belly, using my crutches like grapnels," who "plunged them ahead of me into the undergrowth and [...] pulled myself forward, with an effort of the wrists." His body, "all swollen and racked by a kind of chronic arthritis probably," produces a level of "decrepitude" that leaves Molloy stuck in a ditch and barely able to move (84). What follows in the novel offers a mirroring twist: Jacques Moran, the detective who appears to be instructed to track and find Molloy, finds his own body caught in a process of physical decline that leads, in a clear parallel to Molloy's story, to his being reliant on crutches. Moran's legs stiffen – "I despaired at first of ever bending my leg again" (133) – and he resorts to taking morphine to alleviate the pain caused by the increasing "heaviness" of his leg (139). As readers, we are unsure of the real

motivations of each of the central characters, and there is a sense that Moran may in fact be the author of the Molloy section because of the similarities in their experiences and the looping narrative structure; a voice tells Moran to “write the report” (170) while the novel opens with Molloy reflecting on a “man who comes every week” to take “away the pages” he appears to be writing (3). But, whatever the complexities of the story itself, Molloy presents a world in which to forget (both characters experience amnesia), and to experience both psychological and chronic physical pain, is an everyday occurrence.

In Beckett’s work disability undoubtedly figures ideas of reduction, both of the capabilities of the body and the capacity of the self to conceive of a productive place in the world. The “decrepitude” of Molloy and Moran in *Molloy* are matched by the psychological voids and waste lands that form the locations of many of the plays (the stage directions of *Happy Days* set up an “expanse of scorched grass” subjected to “[b]lazing light”)³ complete with their trapped or restricted protagonists. All can be read in terms of metaphors of a postwar world in which the very idea of subjectivity and belonging is threatened from without and stretched to the point of breaking. But it is equally the case that the all-pervasive nature of disability in Beckett’s work means that bodily and cognitive difference actually become central to the narratives that explore self, place, and the language and forms that express them. In this sense, Beckett’s imagined worlds are textual spaces where disability proliferates and is a norm rather than an exception. This appears true even when alternative explanations might exist for the texts’ representations of physical or cognitive differences. In *Endgame*, Hamm tells a story of knowing “a madman who thought the end of the world had come,” who Hamm would visit in an asylum: “I’d take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness!”⁴ But the man’s reaction is to reject such possibilities of bounty: “He’d snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he’d seen was ashes” (28).

Here it is the “reality” of the man’s apparent hallucination that is meaningful, not the potential in the fecundity and “bounty” that Hamm is attempting to display.

Beckett’s “ashes” are symptomatic of a contemporary postwar period in which technology assumed the capacity to destroy the globe. Within such a context, many writers found it impossible to assume a sense of ongoing progress, whether individual or social, and the disabled body or mind became more frequent in literature from the 1950s and 1960s that challenged ideas of personal or social cohesion. Anne McCaffrey’s 1969 science fiction novel *The Ship Who Sang* (a version of which was first published as a short story in 1961) tells of a future world in which children born with severe physical disabilities but cognitive powers can become “shell people,” beings encased in “life-support” systems with multiple computer/technological connections, who then work to provide services for the societies responsible for their transformation.⁵ Helva, the cyborg protagonist of both the novel and short story versions of the narrative, works as the cognitive center of a spaceship – a “brainship” – in an example of McCaffrey’s fusion of ideas of disability and labor: other instances of such “brain” activity in the novel lie in cyborg input into buildings and cities. In the context of its writing in the 1960s, *The Ship Who Sang* explores disability within the complexities of an emerging contemporary intersection of technology and capitalism.

Such an intersection persisted, especially in science fiction, in the literature of the decades that followed. In William Gibson’s *Sprawl Trilogy* (*Neuromancer*, *Count Zero*, and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*), disabilities produced through technological change are ubiquitous. In the future world of *Neuromancer* (1984), for example, developments in genetic engineering, neurosurgery, and synthetic organ production create multiple possibilities for bodily adaptation that suffuse the novel. Case, the central protagonist, begins the narrative with his nervous system deliberately damaged “with a wartime Russian mycotoxin” after he is caught stealing from his employers,⁶ while Molly, the femme fatale of the story and central female

character, has mirror glasses that are, in fact, “surgically inset, sealing her sockets,” and “ten double-edged, four-centimeter scalpel blades” that emerge from her nails to be used as weapons (36-7). In Gibson’s trilogy, physical or cognitive enhancement is a given, and it is often rather the quality or value of the work that has been undertaken that is the relevant issue. While an idea such as “enhancement” might not seem to suggest issues of disablement, there is often an associated quality of impairment that comes with the adaptation: the changes to Case’s nervous system, for example, stop his ability to access the novel’s cyberworld Matrix. In addition, the very banality and ease of such “updates” creates an everyday spectrum of physical and cognitive identities that echoes the ideas of variation that a critical disability perspective brings to the representation of subjects, selves, and communities. As Kathryn Allan has noted, “SF has long explored deviant and disabled bodies [and] is inhabited by people (and aliens) whose embodiments are situated along the entire spectrum of ability.”⁷ While this can mean a focus on ideas of technology as cure for disabilities, it can also make for disability-rich narratives in which difference becomes the norm.

But disability was also a core component of postwar realist fiction, and often associated with storytelling that highlighted social and political concerns. Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) established (particularly because of its phenomenal popularity) a complex link between notions of disability and justice, as Boo Radley’s (unspecified) learning disability/mental health condition appears integral to Lee’s positioning of him on the side of truth in her account of racism and intolerance in the 1930s American South.⁸ When Boo saves the Finch children from an attack by Bob Ewell at the end of the novel, his status as savior owes much to a wondrous idea of his disabled difference: the agoraphobic recluse who has “haunted” the childhoods of Scout and Jem suddenly intervenes as a vital element in the novel’s moral climax. Here disability equates to innocence, part of Lee’s wider exploration of ideas of loss. Whatever “absence” Boo appears to have, the novel’s

characterisation of his “natural” sense of justice and morality allows him, as he carries Jem home after Ewell’s attack, to be part of the narrative restitution of community order. With Boo, the “simple” man is positioned on the side of moral goodness, a clearly problematic portrayal of disability subjectivity.

In subtle ways, *To Kill a Mockingbird* contextualizes disability within a frame of racial politics and notions of violence. Michelle Jarman’s essay in this volume outlines the processes through which the bodies and minds of women and men of color were targeted by what she terms “white structures of power.” Such structures ranged from slavery and its legacy to eugenics, medical and welfare policies, and the representations of black characters by white authors. But equally, the writing of figures such as Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler, to name just two authors, challenges such structures and reclaims imaginative spaces for the representation of black disabled subjectivities in, for example, the “between worlds” character of Beloved in Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), or Butler’s 1980s *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-89) with its focus on transspecies genetic modification. More generally, however, disability interacted with a range of identity positions in literature from both sides of the Atlantic. British writer Alan Sillitoe conceived of his two most well-known works, the novel *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (1958) and short story *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1959), narratives in which young male protagonists are forced to confront the drudgery and oppression of postwar life, while on a military disability pension granted because of his tuberculosis. Yet Sillitoe is rarely, if ever, considered as a disabled writer, despite the added complexity such a perspective gives to his stories of hardship in the face of class barriers and social change. Both of Sillitoe’s works can, in fact, be read in terms of a disability-informed critique of capitalist notions of work and progress. In *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, for example, the protagonist Smith is sentenced to a brutal regime in a junior detention center following an act of petty crime.⁹ He escapes the drudgery through

running, and is subsequently entered in a cross-country race with the promise of a reduced workload if he wins. But, though leading up until the very end of the race, Smith pauses just before the finishing line, letting others pass him in a defiant statement of independence. This statement is noticeably a refusal to define his sense of self in terms of standard notions of physical capability and achievement. He chooses to stop rather than run, to idle rather than win, knowing that this will consign him to harder meaningless physical work in prison. From the vantage point of his own disability, Sillitoe undermines the idea of success being a byproduct of physical activity. Smith's body is not disabled, but he challenges the idea of progress that physical ability purportedly brings.

Such a reading of Sillitoe's work, while it highlights the ways in which mid-century writing outlined and developed ideas around subject-based identity positions, also prefigures the place of disability in the more contemporary world of neoliberal work demands and patterns, a society sociologist John Tomlinson has characterized as a "culture of speed" in which a 24/7 idea of "immediacy" dominates ideas not only of work, but also of selfhood.¹⁰ The seeming need to be active, indeed the notion that activity is an end in itself, creates a world – of labor especially – in which disability is understood to be a problem because it is seen not to embrace multitasking and productivity as norms in work contexts. In many contemporary media accounts, disability is seemingly inexorably linked to questions of welfare and benefits, with individual subjectivity understood primarily in economic terms.¹¹ Viewed in this way, those with disabilities will inevitably be seen in terms of deficit, apparently lacking some required element for full participation in civil society, and such conceptions have become one contemporary manifestation of the ways in which disability is figured within a long historical language of absence or loss.

And yet, in a range of fiction – both popular and literary – that represents disability experience with insight and sensitivity, it is precisely this aspect of "work" that functions to

express the value of disabled difference. In crime fiction in particular (as Ria Cheyne shows in her essay in this volume) the exceptionality of the disabled detective reconfigures ideas of insight and perception. While this is true of popular crime fiction, it is also apparent in novels by authors, such as Jonathan Lethem and Mark Haddon, not usually associated with crime writing. Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999) and Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) both weave detective narratives through their storylines, and in each novel it is the disability of the central protagonist that provides the means by which the mystery is solved. Lionel Essrog, the main character of *Motherless Brooklyn*, has Tourette's and is widely ridiculed by others in the novel as a spectacle and "freakshow" for his outbursts: "Me, I become a walking joke, preposterous, improbable, unseeable," as he puts it.¹² But it is precisely his Tourettic ability to make links and associations, as well as the presumption by others that he cannot be intelligent, that allows him to find the killer of Frank Minna, his employer and friend. Lionel notes that his compulsions help him to focus when on stakeout duty, for example, while a dying Minna passes on a clue, in the form of a joke, that he knows only Lionel will be able to decode because of his ability with language. It is "precisely because you were crazy that everyone thought you were stupid," the story's femme fatale Julia tells Lionel near the end of the novel (300). But Lionel is anything but stupid. Though his Tourette's frequently overwhelms him – "My mouth won't quit" as he puts it (1) – and he recounts numerous occasions where he has "no control in my personal experiment of self" (131), the novel maneuvers Lionel into a position as "successor and avenger [...] a detective on a case" (132) where he is clearly highly capable. This capability extends to his narration. For much of the novel Lionel speaks out to us, as readers, describing his condition and the ways in which it creates a disabling world. But, at the end of the novel when describing a particular compulsion – "the wild call of symmetry" – as he fights a hitman who attacks him, he ends a paragraph by saying simply: "It's a Tourette's thing – you wouldn't

understand” (283). Gone is the need to explain himself to others. Here, whether Lionel is a “freakshow” or not is immaterial. His is doing things his own way.

Haddon’s narrator, fifteen-year-old Christopher Boone, has autism and while he tends to dislike fiction – “I don’t like proper novels” he notes,¹³ “because they are lies about things which didn’t happen” (25) – he appreciates detective writing: “I do like murder mystery novels [...]. In a murder mystery novel someone has to work out who the murderer is and catch them. It is a puzzle” (5). *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is Christopher’s “favourite book” (88), and “I like Sherlock Homes and I think that if I were a proper detective he is the kind of detective I would be” (92). Christopher’s own detection lacks the glamor of many of Holmes’s cases, but in his search for his mother, whom he presumes has died, he – like Lionel – evidences a work practice that centers on the nature of his condition. Christopher’s literalism and attention to detail allow him to piece together the circumstances that led to his mother leaving the family home, and his single-mindedness leads to his being able to travel alone across London in order to find her. Christopher’s autism is, in the novel, a filter that allows him to discriminate – as he sees it – between the essential and irrelevant. His detective abilities fill him with confidence. As he imagines a future full of academic success at university he notes: “And I know I can do this because I went to London on my own [...] and I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything” (268). Earlier in the novel, Haddon has Christopher problematize the biblical associations of his name; he does not want to be associated with what he calls the “apocryphal story” of carrying Christ across a river. Rather, he asserts, “I want my name to mean me” (20). In allowing such fidelity to Christopher’s own sense of self, Haddon creates a fiction that aligns itself with disability experiences conceived as having validity and integrity. By making Christopher the novel’s narrator, Haddon extends these ideas of selfhood and integrity to formal issues of narration and connections to the reader. As Alice Hall says, “Christopher’s

first-person perspective does seek to render an autistic point of view normal; as readers we are complicit with his way of seeing the world.”¹⁴ Crucial to the representation of Christopher’s condition, then, is the understanding that it is mediated through a specific literary lens.

Both Lethem and Haddon are aware of the trappings of many disability narratives in which stories are resolved through sentimental or melodramatic interventions, and in each novel these are resisted. Neither Lionel nor Christopher is, for example, allowed straightforward personal or family resolutions at the stories’ end (Lionel alienates and then loses his girlfriend while Christopher’s parents are separated and he is living in an unglamorous small apartment with his mother at the novel’s conclusion). Equally, for all their achievements, neither Lionel nor Christopher is specifically heroic in the context of the worlds in which they live. Lionel grew up in “St Vincent’s home for Boys, in the part of downtown Brooklyn no developer yet wishes to claim for some upscale, renovated neighborhood” (36), and Haddon’s choice of the nondescript satellite town of Swindon as the setting for *Curious Incident* indicates a desire to make Christopher’s day-to-day life reflect a suburban ordinariness. Both novels stress disability is an everyday occurrence, even as they create mysteries that are solved.

Motherless Brooklyn and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* are also examples of another notable new feature of contemporary disability fiction, namely a concentration on cognitive conditions and neurobehavioral syndromes. Writing in 2009, Marco Roth termed this a move to “the neurological novel,” a process that sought to reject the workings of “the novel of consciousness or the psychological or confessional novel” that had dominated fictional representations of states of mind for most of the twentieth century.¹⁵ Suspicious of the psychologizing that accompanies literary accounts of mind, writers – Roth asserts – have moved to portray issues such as identity, motivation or behavior through a

scientific prism that values neurological brain makeup as a superior way of articulating personhood. Both Tourette's and autism, neurobehavioral conditions that have received much media attention in the last few decades, exemplify this new cultural/literary turn, and Roth lists a number of other writers (Ian McEwan and Richard Powers, among others) who have produced recent fiction that seeks to explore what Nikolas Rose and Joelle Abi-Rached term "the management of the mind."¹⁶ As Rose and Abi-Rached note: "As the twenty-first century began, there was a pervasive sense, among the neuroscientific researchers themselves, among clinicians, commentators, writers of popular science books, and policymakers that advances in our understanding of the human brain were nothing short of revolutionary."¹⁷ Fiction that followed such heady strains of revolution found, in neurological/disabled difference, both new topics and new ways to tell old stories.

In Joshua Ferris's 2010 novel, *The Unnamed*, Tim Farnsworth, a successful Manhattan lawyer, suddenly develops a condition that causes him, against his will, to have to walk without stopping. The condition's origins baffle clinical expertise, while Farnsworth can only describe its manifestations and sensations in "nonmedical and not very useful ways"; he talks of feeling "jangly, hyperslogged, all bunched up," noting that "he spoke a language only he understood."¹⁸ In a clever analysis of the poverty of medical knowledge surrounding many neurobehavioral conditions, Ferris has Farnsworth subjected to multiple opinions from doctors with different medical specialisms: he is, varyingly, referred to neurologists, psychiatrists, and environmental psychologists; is subjected to multiple MRI scans; has group therapy suggested because of possible problems with compulsion; given a list of urban toxins as a possible cause; prescribed muscle relaxants; and has rebirthing recommended. One clinician tells him that, given that there is "no laboratory examination to confirm the presence or absence of the condition" it might not "even exist at all"; while another diagnoses "benign idiopathic perambulation," a nod to the idea that, in a world governed by new neurological

knowledge, any unusual activity can be seen as a syndrome (41). Although “the health professionals suggested clinical delusion, hallucinations, even multiple personality disorder” Farnsworth is sceptical of their expertise. He believes that “his mind was intact, his mind was unimpeachable. If he could not gain dominion over his body, that was not ‘his’ doing. Not an occult possession but a hijacking of some obscure order of the body” (24). For Farnsworth, the possibility that such an “obscure order,” affecting the body but located in the brain, is the cause of the walking allows him to admit to a disability while preserving the sense that, psychologically, his mind is intact.

The subtle unpicking of the paucity of medical understanding in *The Unnamed* allows Ferris to use debates surrounding psychology and neurology (the “mind versus brain” argument) as a disability optic to examine central elements of American society.¹⁹ As Farnsworth walks away from both his work and his family, the novel questions the formation of both institutions: the relentless demands of the 24/7 work culture in which he locates much of his sense of self, and the expectations surrounding a “loving” family structure (much of the novel focuses on how Farnsworth’s wife and daughter are forced to adapt to his condition). Crucially, it is his experience of disability that provides this critical insight and, for all the seemingly exotic nature of the condition at the heart of Ferris’s novel, it is its everyday manifestations and intersections with life events that are most revealing.

The suggestions provided by new neurological research as to the constitution of minds and selves at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty first were significant and profound. They created new possible subject matters for writers (such as Lethem, Haddon, and Ferris) seeking to make subtle disability stories about the makeup of individuals and their relationships to communities. But it would be a mistake to think that such subtlety has been the norm in contemporary writing about disability. For every novel such as the three described above there were numerous others that continued those practices

recognizable from the long history of disability representation: narratives of overcoming or sentimentality; crude stories in which disability is equated with criminality or social difference; wondrous tales in which physical or cognitive difference produces awe in fellow characters (and indeed readers). The turn to neurology in fiction opened the door for numerous accounts, both first- and third-person, of characters with behavioral difference, and so offered endless problematic metaphors in which disability might be couched. In *The Way Things Look to Me*, a 2009 novel by British Pakistani writer Roopa Farooki, for example, autism is used to showcase a classic set of disability stereotypes. Yasmin is the youngest child of three siblings who have lost their parents, and her difference is figured throughout the novel either as evidence of a set of personal idiosyncrasies, or as challenges for brother Asif (whose duty as primary carer is seen to inhibit his own life) and sister Lila (who resents Yasmin for the manner in which she was the object of their mother's attention).²⁰ In a manner recognizable from any number of disability narratives from the nineteenth century onwards, Yasmin becomes the conduit through which ideas of family solidity, personal sacrifice, and social (non)acceptance are explored, with her non-normal status as a "problem" figure allowing for the discussion of a host of these and other non-disability tropes. Farooki's twist on this is, following on from figures such as Haddon and Lethem, to give Yasmin her own voice, but this voice frequently descends into cliché and the bizarre, as with her assumption, attributed to the idea that autism is a condition associated with logic, routine, and rational thinking, that a "normal" response to finishing high school is to contemplate suicide. *The Way Things Look to Me* was received with critical acclaim, and longlisted for both the 2010 Orange Prize for fiction and the 2011 Impac Dublin Literary Award. Such status reveals the extent to which problematic disability representation can still pass without comment in the world of contemporary writing.

Thinking about representations of disability in contemporary writing then, it becomes clear that there is no one trajectory that defines or illustrates commonalities in the ways stories are told. As G. Thomas Couser has shown in his essay in this volume, the proliferation of disability life writing since the 1990s has given an urgent voice to experiences that might have been left unexpressed (and unread) while, as the above has shown, there are examples in recent fiction where the lived difference of disability informs and structures narratives of all different kinds. Yet the age-old tendency to configure disability as absence, lack, loss, problem, or tragedy shows no signs of disappearing. Between February and March 2015, Brad Fraser's play *Kill Me Now* ran at the Park Theatre in London. Fraser, a queer Canadian Metis from British Columbia, has been writing for the theatre since the 1970s and is known for staging controversial topics, including AIDS, steroid abuse, and the sex industry, in an abrasively comic fashion. In *Kill Me Now*, father Joey gives up a promising career as a writer to look after his disabled son Jake, who has spinal stenosis. In a dramatic twist, Joey develops a disability himself and, unable to face a future of seeming hardship, commits suicide.

The play drew a furious response from critic Dea Birkett, herself the parent of a child with disabilities. Writing in the *British Guardian* newspaper, Birkett asked:

Why can't theatre, which is supposed to be about creativity, imagine what it's like to be me? Perhaps the best way to do that would be to include at least one disabled actor in the cast. But that might risk showing the life of a family which lives with disability as messy, flawed, joyous, human – and we wouldn't want that. Because the title is *Kill Me Now*. And in the end, the father, becoming disabled himself – developing a creeping disabling condition – and with the terrible burden of Joey, hates life so much he kills himself, then the audience applauds.

She went on:

Still, the play disturbingly rings true to the non-disabled audience because it gives voice and panders to all their preconceptions and fears about what it's like to be in a family like ours. It presumes that we're both consumed by disability and nobly fight it – yet still pities us. When the audience gives a standing ovation, they're applauding this prejudice.²¹

Birkett's critique of *Kill Me Now* comes from within the experience of the subject the play presents as fiction but, as she makes clear, her criticism derives as much from a sense of Fraser's theatre perpetuating wide cultural stereotypes as it does from an interaction with her personal circumstances. Birkett concludes her review with "sorry – I'm still here," an assertion of presence and a refusal to be subsumed in Fraser's narrative of pity and tragedy. Potentially the more telling point though, as she realizes, is that the attitudes and sentiments in *Kill Me Now*, a drama awarded four and five stars in reviews across North America and Europe, come not as a particular surprise. It is still, it seems, acceptable to explore ideas pertaining to "the human condition," even considerations of extremities such as suicide and death, through prejudicial notions of disabled bodies and minds.²²

With the kinds of ambivalence displayed in the representation of disability in contemporary writing, it is inevitable that there will continue to be the sort of tensions noted in this essay. If individual appreciation of the experience of disabled lives and the nature of their distinctiveness has never been greater, structural and systemic conditions in the contemporary period have not only maintained discrimination, they have increased it. Whether in the neoliberal world of work or state vocabularies of categorization, the parameters of much contemporary life serve to work against the ways in which people with disabilities live. The social narratives such systems produce will undoubtedly influence the

kinds of literary stories that are told about disability, and as long as this is the case the representations that result will continue to be volatile and ambiguous.

Notes

¹ Lennard J. Davis, *The End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), chapter 1.

² Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, the Unnameable* (New York: Grove, 2009), pp. 56, 71. Further page references to primary texts will be given parenthetically in the body of the chapter.

³ Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 1.

⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 28.

⁵ Anne McCaffrey, *The Ship Who Sang* (London: Corgi, 1982).

⁶ William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: Harper Voyager, 1995), p. 12.

⁷ Kathryn Allan (ed.), *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 2.

⁸ Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (London: Arrow, 2010).

⁹ Allan Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007).

¹⁰ John Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy* (London: SAGE, 2007).

See also Robert Hassan, *Empires of Speed: Accelerations of Politics and Society* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009).

¹¹ See, for example, Frances Ryan, "Poverty has been rebranded as personal failure," *The Guardian*, 22 April 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/apr/22/disability-poverty-crisis-government-policies>, accessed 10 October 2016.

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- ¹² Jonathan Lethem, *Motherless Brooklyn* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 2.
- ¹³ Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003), p. 5.
- ¹⁴ Alice Hall, *Literature and Disability* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 118.
- ¹⁵ Marco Roth, "The Rise of the Neuronovel," *N+1*, 8 (2009), <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-8/essays/the-rise-of-the-neuronovel/>, accessed 17 August 2016.
- ¹⁶ Nikolas Rose and Joelle M. Abi-Rached, *Neuro: The New Brain Sciences and the Management of the Mind* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).
- ¹⁷ Rose and Abi-Rached, *Neuro*, p. 5.
- ¹⁸ Joshua Ferris, *The Unnamed*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2011), p. 126.
- ¹⁹ See Nikolas Rose, "Neuroscience and the Future for Mental Health?," *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*, 25 (2016), 95-100, and Raymond Tallis, *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (Durham: Acumen, 2011).
- ²⁰ Roopa Farooki, *The Way Things Look to Me* (London: St Martin's Press, 2011).
- ²¹ Dea Birkett, "Why can't theatre imagine what it's really like to be the parent of a disabled child?" *The Guardian*, 26 February 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/26/theatre-parent-disabled-child-kill-me-now>, accessed 12 April 2015. Fraser responded to Birkett in *The Stage* magazine: Brad Fraser, "Did I get my play about disability wrong? No, but we need to talk about this," *The Stage*, 9 March 2015, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2015/brad-fraser-get-play-disability-wrong-no-need-talk/>, accessed 12 April 2015.
- ²² The 2016 release of Thea Sharrock's film *Me Before You*, based on the novel by Jojo Moyes, received criticism from disability groups similar to that directed at *Kill Me Now*. See Cavan Sieczkowski, "Me Before You criticized for its portrayal of disability," *Huffington*

Post, 25 May 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/me-before-you-criticized-for-portrayal-of-disability_us_574602b3e4b0dacf7ad3ca13, accessed 28 August 2016.