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"A Fearsome Possibility": The Disabled Body in the Children’s Novel

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Thesis Abstract

Disability affects everyone, either first-hand or indirectly. However, discussion of disability in our culture seems to be verboten. Disabled people make up our largest minority group, but perhaps fear of physical imperfection controls the silence about disability. Taking disability out of the “problem” sphere means discussing it openly, as early as possible. Children need to be in this discussion, since they notice difference in bodies and ask about it, and are often silenced for asking.

An ideal place to start the dialogue of disability with children is in their literature. Since children’s literature is used quite effectively to impart didactic knowledge, why not expand that knowledge to include disability? Children’s books that teach about the experience of living with a disability are already in the canon – two books by E.B. White, Stuart Little and The Trumpet of the Swan. They address the issue of living with disability in a proactive way. These two books break the silence about living with disability and are great learning opportunities for children.

Keywords: Disability, Children’s Literature, E.B. White, Stuart Little, The Trumpet of the Swan, Multicultural Studies
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INTRODUCTION

“Disability is not an object – a woman with a cane – but a social process that intimately involves everyone who has a body and lives in the world of the senses.” – Lennard Davis, Enforcing Normalcy

No one talks about disability, but everyone does something about it. Disability affects everyone, either first-hand or indirectly. However, discussion of disability in our culture seems to be verboten. If one were to ask an acquaintance or a co-worker if he or she knows someone intimately who has a disability, his/her first response might be, no. However, ask again and they may re-think their answer. The question evolves into trying to think of a relative or friend who does not have a disability. Given its prevalence, why is disability not discussed? As Robert Pirsig once wrote, “Some things you miss because they’re so big,” and since disabled people make up our largest minority group, that may be true. Perhaps fear of not being perfect controls the silence about disability. In Enforcing Normalcy, Lennard Davis writes that “the ‘problem’ is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person” (Davis 24). But how can our largest minority group be considered a problem? Disability is a fact of life for everyone, from the elderly to children. Taking disability out of the “problem” sphere means
discussing it openly, as early as possible. Children need to be in this discussion, since they notice difference in bodies and ask about it, and are often silenced for asking.

An ideal place to start the dialogue of disability with children is in their literature. Every child is exposed to literature, if not at home, then at school, as part of the reading curriculum. Since children’s literature is used quite effectively to impart didactic knowledge, including tolerance of minorities, why not expand that knowledge to include disability? Children’s books that teach about the experience of living with a disability are already in the canon – two books by E.B. White, *Stuart Little* and *The Trumpet of the Swan*. They are well-written and valuable literature in their own right. They also happen to address the issue of living with disability in a proactive way, as well. These two books break the silence about living with disability and are great learning opportunities for children.

**Background: Defining Disability**

How is disability defined? Significant impairment that interferes with social or vocational functioning is defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act as “disability.” According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2006 49.7 million Americans reported having a disability. Since this is a significant number, and since a person’s chance of physical impairment or disability increases with age,
discussion regarding the representation and place of disabled people in society is crucial. Since disability is commonplace, representation of disability should be an everyday, prosaic occurrence.

Dialogue about disability, either in an academic setting or in a cultural context, is often intensely polarized between open discussion and advocacy of realistic portrayal in culture, versus fear of disability and society’s predilection for what Lennard Davis in *Enforcing Normalcy* calls “living in a world of norms [in which] each of us endeavors to be normal” (23). Disability activist groups have made efforts to change the role of disabled people from marginalized to proactive, at first through language (fighting pejoratives), and then through legislation (the Americans with Disabilities Act). According to the ADA, disability in human beings has a three-pronged definition. A person with a disability:

1) has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities;

2) has a record of such an impairment;

3) or is regarded as having such an impairment.

These criteria are purposely broad to allow inclusion of all disabled people under the ADA umbrella, allowing the disabled to define themselves. The efforts of activists and the ADA have increased the visibility of the disabled and made realistic representation of the disabled in popular culture more prevalent. The efforts of activists began with a shift in the emphasis from “individual disability”
to a "social disability" model, in particular changing the language of disability. In
*Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*, Michael Oliver states, “[The
individual model of disability] locates the ‘problem’ of disability within the
individual” and also states that disability is always seen in this model as “a
personal tragedy.” Oliver states that the social model of disability encompasses
“all the things that impose restrictions on disabled people” – in other words,
artificial boundaries and definitions placed by others (32-33).

This change in location means that instead of the disabled being in a
position where they do not fit into society’s parameters of architecture or
language, society may change its parameters of architecture and language to
include the disabled. For example, an owner may build a quaint restaurant that is
only accessible by stairs. In a pre-social disability society, the owner would
tacitly send the message to the disabled that the restaurant is not for use of the
disabled, and no one would question this: it is the disabled person’s “problem.”
In a post-social disability society, it would be the restaurant owner’s responsibility
to provide a “location” physically and culturally for every person to go out to eat.
Thus, the disabled are not causing problems for society, but are educating society
in how to be inclusive. In *The Politics of Disablement*, Oliver also quotes
Albrecht about this change in viewpoint: “We contend that disability definitions
are not rationally determined but socially constructed. Despite the objective
reality, what becomes a disability is determined by the social meanings
individuals attach to particular physical and mental impairments” (78). This definition turns on its head the idea of disability as an entirely concrete or objectively-defined state, which may have been what the ADA had in mind when they constructed their broad definition. In *Constructs of Disability*, Claire Tregaskis defines the social model somewhat differently but just as provocatively: “The social model, then is that disability is caused by human factors... that [put] disabled people at a disadvantage compared to their non-disabled colleagues,” and defines this model as a “more positive tool for change” (Tregaskis 11). The social model underpins the Americans With Disabilities Act, particularly the third part of its definition, in which a person “is regarding has having such an impairment.” If access to public buildings needs to be improved under the act, it is because the buildings are lacking, not the people attempting to get into them.

To illustrate a concrete example of the usefulness and inclusive nature of social disability theory, one can use Oliver’s and Albrecht’s rubrics in a vocational framework as well. To use the example of a physically disabled person seeking employment in a non-industrialized society, a person who has a physical disability has value as a worker if he or she can work effectively despite the disability. However, in an industrial society, for example one in which most jobs require standing for long periods in factories, a physical disability cannot be compensated for as easily. Therefore, a physically disabled person may have a more difficult time entering the work force. Oliver refers to this as the “mode of
production” framework and states that if a highly productive workforce is valued primarily in a society, a disabled person will be seen as an economic liability. In such a society, disabled persons may be underemployed, poorer, and politically silent. Oliver argues for a re-evaluation of the values of a society that, through its work culture, would exclude a significant segment of the population for the sake of economics.

Finkelstein makes a similar argument in *Disabling Barriers – Enabling Environments* when he states, “The predominant factor contributing to the disablement of different groups is the way in which people can participate in the creation of social wealth” (12). Disability is defined by one’s ability to contribute to the economy, not defined by physical impairment. Thus, one can understand the genesis of the social model of disability, arising as it did out of a belief that societal norms create disability, not the other way around. If these norms can be changed to accept physical difference instead of critiquing it, then the vocational potential of every person could be maximized. Oliver’s writing about the social model was an important glimpse at hidden cultural attitudes that socially ranked people according to their physical ability, rankings that allowed for legal discrimination. Since Oliver’s writings, other disability scholars have focused on the cultural situation of disability, acknowledging that framing the body and disability as cultural constructs is difficult, yet opens up arguments that legal and cultural changes both need to take place to allow the disabled a stronger position.
in society. This difference in emphasis is described by Rosemarie Garland Thomson in *Extraordinary Bodies* in a chapter titled “Politicizing Bodily Differences”:

One of this book’s major aims is to challenge entrenched assumptions that “able-bodiedness” and its conceptual opposite, “disability,” are self-evident physical conditions. My intention is to defamiliarize these identity categories by disclosing how the “physically disabled” are produced by way of legal, medical, political, cultural and literary narratives that comprise an exclusionary discourse (6).

Thomson argues for a branching out from physical or legal definitions of disability, in hopes of exposing discrimination and prejudice based upon complex societal factors. The Americans with Disabilities Act’s definition of disability works in a utilitarian way to single out frankly discriminatory behavior – such as denying access to public buildings – for censure and to enact laws to prohibit such behavior. As a legal framework it is useful. However, in the field of disability studies there are many different definitions of disability. Disability is so entwined with ever-changing personal and social definitions, as highlighted by Thomson and Oliver above, that to define its essence more broadly would make for lively debate. However, difficulty in defining it does not make it non-existent; this difficulty simply encourages one’s creativity and tolerance for many viewpoints
of disability. For the purposes of clarity in this argument, the Americans with Disabilities Act legal definition of disability will be accepted.

The Medical Versus the Social Model

Disability scholars such as Simi Linton note that with advances in medical treatments, disability was viewed through a medical lens in the later 20th century, which had positive aspects such as taking disability out of the arena of blame and mystery. The Americans with Disabilities Act’s definitions of disability did open another avenue for debate among disability theorists. The “medical” definition of disability, while sometimes seeming cut-and-dried, did not clarify the differing opinions about what constituted disability if a medical diagnosis was unclear or not agreed upon by doctors. Activists wanted to ensure that a physical impairment that was not easily labeled by doctors was not used to marginalize anybody. To avoid discussions of who was “legitimately” disabled, using the doctor as the final arbiter, disability scholars tended to focus on eradication of arbitrary definitions for disability.

However, there is danger in going too far in the other direction. In *Claiming Disability*, Linton states, “When medical definitions of disability are dominant, it is logical to separate people according to biomedical condition through the use of diagnostic categories and to forefront medical perspectives on human variation” (12). Some scholars and activists reject a medical model of
disability entirely, but even those scholars who acknowledge medicine’s ability to improve access and comfort to people with disability refuse to discuss disability in strictly medical language. Mitchell and Snyder, in *Cultural Locations of Disability*, state that “many disability writers and cultural studies theorists have challenged the very empiricism informing medical conditions and labels” (11). In short, the medical viewpoint is too narrow a focus, since the goal of medicine is to “cure” the disability. This focus interferes with objectivity, and also with seeing the disabled person as entire, not an affliction to be treated. The disabled have come to realize that they gain more political ground when a cultural rather than medical model of disability is employed. In *Claiming Disability*, Linton writes,

> When disability is redefined as a social/political category, people with a variety of conditions are identified as *people with disabilities* or *disabled people*, a group bound by common social and political experience. These designations, as reclaimed by the community, are used to identify us as a constituency, to serve our needs for unity and identity, and to function as a basis for political activism. (12)

Thus, it matters greatly how disability is defined. If it is framed with a more social and political focus, empowerment and a stronger voice can be gained.

If disability cannot always be defined as a fixed, static, medical condition, then who should be considered disabled? Lennard Davis has brought to the forefront an idea that for many in society can be fear-inducing – the fluidity of
“disability.” He observes in his book *Enforcing Normalcy* that membership in the community of disabled people is not exclusive, calling disability “an extremely unstable category… often used to obscure or repress the fact that disability is not a static category but one which expands and contracts to include ‘normal’ people as well” (xv). He encourages the “normal” society to face the fact that a nondisabled body is difficult to define medically, if it even exists, and that the line between disabled and nondisabled is not sharp. Thus the category of disability studies becomes even more inclusive, instead of exclusive. In *Bending Over Backwards*, Davis goes further with this idea of inclusiveness, arguing that instead of increasing the political power and voice of the disabled, society should reject terms such as “normal” and “disabled” and focus on the continuum of the body and the cultural impact of people working together for unity as one imperfect physical and political body. This may be difficult, with physical perfection valued so highly in our society, but if it is achieved through common cultural narratives then a starting place for this unity can be established.

**Literature as a Tool for Change**

Using popular texts to change the representation of the disabled is one way to bring theory about disability into mainstream attention and discussion. Literary representation of the disabled as a tool for social change cannot be over-emphasized. Disability theorists are near-unanimous in their judgment that many
20th century novels fail to represent the disabled person in a realistic manner. Exceptions are noted, but are few. Simi Linton notes that “Disabled people are rarely depicted… in fiction as being in control of their own lives…. [and] artistic products render disability as powerful and disabled people as powerless… particularly noteworthy for its absence is the voice that speaks… of life, delight, struggle and purposeful action” (112-113). If negative representation in literature is “disability’s malignant repertoire” according to Mitchell and Snyder, perhaps that malignancy can be healed in the same literary format.

This agreement among disability scholars about unrealistic portrayal underscores the importance of accurate representation in literature. Lennard Davis writes, “Rare indeed is a novel… that introduces a disabled character whose disability is not the central focus of the work” (156-57). Many disability studies scholars see literature as an area where the positive representation of disability is crucial to erasing the invisibility of the disabled.

Using children’s literature to model positive representation of the disabled may seem an unusual choice, but its advantages should be considered. First, it is readily available and valuable by itself in the genre of children’s literature. Children’s books are naturally the first “serious literature” children are exposed to. Children make up a proportion of disabled people and are aware either personally or vicariously of society’s limitations in seeing disabled persons as part of the continuum of body difference. By the time children are exposed to reading,
they are already aware of body difference. A good children’s text including disability would be a gateway to honest open discussion.

Children’s texts exist that discuss disability solely as a didactic topic. Books such as *Lee, the Rabbit with Epilepsy* by Deborah Moss and *Alex, the Kid with AIDS* by Linda Walvoord Girard leave little doubt as to their subject matter. These texts often do not enter the canon of popular children’s fiction because they are so narrowly written. The existence of a well-crafted children’s book with a realistic depiction of disability is a rare occurrence, probably because of our society’s disinclination to discuss illness, and the spoken and unspoken message that physical perfection is a standard everyone should attempt to meet. Children are aware of social norms at a young age and may internalize the idea of the “different” body as frightening without an alternate voice, in the form of children’s literature, to challenge this idea.

The genre of children’s books is an ideal place for discussion and exposure of general societal morals and dictates, and authors and instructors have been aware of this for centuries. In *Children’s Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*, Karin Lesnik-Oberstein argues, “The narratives adults attempt to convey to children are controlled and formed, implicitly and explicitly, by the didactic impulse; that the roots of allocating books... to and produce them for, children, lie in the effort to educate” (38). In other words, books cannot help but teach values and culture to children; some feel this is their only purpose. Kathy Saunders, in
“What Disability Studies Can Do For Children’s Literature” writes that educators and writers have grown to understand that “children as young as four years old are capable of determining complex, subtle meaning and attitude in texts” (9). In other words, children can judge, understand and remember what they read, even if it is fictional. Children’s literature can address what Sheila Egoff calls “the basic needs we feel, questions we ask, answers we find—of the instinctive, universal challenge of the journey [and] tension of the conflict” (26). This emphasis on the “basic questions” asked can be expanded to include discussion about the disabled and how they are treated in society, as seen through the microcosm of the children’s book.

Two existing canonical children’s books already engage this discussion of disability. These novels, if taught to primary school children in a multicultural literary setting, have the potential to educate children about disability in a way that teaches tolerance and empowerment. They are two novels of E.B. White – *Stuart Little* and the *Trumpet of the Swan*, books that I argue feature disabled protagonists who have agency and experience interesting, productive and happy lives despite physical and environmental limitations. Even if E.B. White is better known for *Charlotte’s Web*, his other books are widely available and known in elementary school, particularly *Stuart Little*. *Stuart Little* is considered canonical enough to inspire two recent movies.
Stuart Little, a novel about a mouse-like person born into a human family, teaches tolerance of the disabled through a small protagonist who educates others about how to treat him. He never becomes a “mascot.” He strives for and attains a completely independent life in a big city, gains employment, and finds companionship, all the while never believing that a full life is not available to him because he is small.

In The Trumpet of the Swan, the mute protagonist feels his silence is disastrous because he will have difficulty mating. He finds a way to communicate, learns to play the trumpet, negotiates a big city as well, and never loses sight of his goal – to retire to the place he grew up in, with the mate he wants. The novel emphasizes the importance of creativity in overcoming physical barriers and finding alternate ways to communicate one’s wants and needs in society.

These two books would be useful in teaching children about the lives, rights and proper treatment of the disabled. They are not prescriptive, but they both educate about what it would be like to have a disability, how to advocate for better treatment if you do, and how to maintain a free life and attain your goals. These two books could be incorporated into a multicultural unit in the classroom, since they deal with a culture – the culture of disability, that has its own history, folklore, and political advocacy.
CHAPTER ONE

E.B. White’s first novel, *Stuart Little*, was published in 1945. It is a story about a mouse living in a human family, a mouse *born* to human parents. Immediately, the reader may sense that this is no ordinary children’s book. Stuart’s small size is crucial to the plot, of course, but his birth is matter-of-factly reported. The tone of the book is set: this is no ordinary main character — let’s see what happens to him. This disability narrative is not a tragedy; it is a story about a little person. Stuart’s small size can characterize him as a disabled person, but he displays a positive and realistic attitude about his size. He is willing to go into public, to work, to engage in recreation, and to stand up to ignorant people. All of this positive representation takes place within an interesting, entertaining narrative.

The first sentences of the novel describe Stuart Little’s birth: “When Mrs. Frederick C. Little’s second son arrived, everybody noticed that he was not much bigger than a mouse. The truth of the matter was, the baby looked very much like a mouse in every way” (White 1). That Stuart Little is mouse-like yet also a natural-born member of a human family is an encouraging inroad into the discussion of disability in the family milieu. Stuart’s mouse-like physical appearance simply happens; there is no explanation, no science, and no blame placed on anyone in the book. Stuart’s appearance, in the most basic way, is what he is. White does not feel the need to explain how he came to be so small;
everyone accepts Stuart, including himself. This initial acceptance of physical
difference allows the book to move forward to the important parts, such as how
Stuart deals with his environment as a small person.

Stuart is small enough to qualify for the ADA's definition of disability: his
impairment does limit his activities, and he has a medical record of his small size
(his mother takes him to the doctor for a check up). The closest parallel in the
human disability world to Stuart, in terms of his smallness, would be dwarfism.
Joan Ablon writes extensively of dwarfism and its effect upon families, and in her
article "Ambiguity and Difference," she states the "clinical definition of dwarfism
[being] persons who are 4'10" or under" (789). Dwarfism has widely ranging
medical definitions with a large umbrella of categories, and Ablon quotes the
frequency of dwarfism as ranging from 100,000 to 500,000 individuals.

However, an interesting divergence between Stuart's birth and the birth of
a dwarf child in the human world is the Little family's reaction to Stuart's size.
Stuart's mother is not upset when Stuart is born. She takes Stuart to the doctor
because she does not know how much he should weigh. Stuart's doctor is
"delighted." Ablon writes in "Living with Difference" that parents and deliverer-
doctors of dwarf children do not share this positive reaction: "Extreme shock [is]
the universal initial response of parents when informed about the birth [of dwarf
children]" (Ablon 138). Doctors often do not help the parents' adjustment by
their inability to discuss the child’s dwarfism with the parents. This tends to make the parents’ acceptance of the child’s dwarfism a more difficult process.

Compare this with the family doctor’s reaction to Stuart’s birth: “The doctor was delighted with Stuart and said that it was very unusual for an American family to have a mouse” (White 3). This viewpoint, although perhaps simplistic, is a terrific example of a seemingly casual remark that promotes tolerance and understanding of the disabled in any novel, let alone a children’s novel. The doctor does not wring his hands; he allows Stuart to exist just as he is.

Stuart’s natural birth to human parents caused consternation among some readers, in particular his *New Yorker* publisher Harold Ross, who told White, “God damn it, White, at least you could have had him adopted.” Garth Williams’ illustrations show Stuart resembling a mouse almost exactly, the major difference being that Stuart is bipedal. Stuart’s family refers to him as a mouse, which is first acknowledged in the book on page 3, when Stuart’s family takes him to the doctor, who says, “… that it was very unusual for an American family to have a mouse” (White 3). *The Letters of E.B. White* includes a letter from 1945 in which E.B. White himself forgot this fact and corrected someone from his publishing house who called Stuart a mouse. To Ursula Nordstrom, he wrote:

One or two of the Harper ads referred to Stuart as a “mouse.” This is inaccurate and probably better be abandoned. Nowhere in the book (I think I am right about this) is Stuart described as a mouse. He is a small
guy who looks very much like a mouse, but he obviously is not a mouse. He is a second son... (I am wrong. Stuart is called a mouse on page 36 [and page 3] – I just found it. He should not have been.). (White 270)

Later, E.B. White wrote in an essay for Children’s Literature: Views and Reviews, “Children... accept, almost without question, anything you present them with, as long as it is presented honestly, fearlessly, and clearly. I handed them, against the advice of experts, a mouse-boy, and they accepted it without a quiver” (Haviland 140). Stuart’s small size as symbolized by his being a mouse is an adept way to introduce disability into children’s literature through a common plot device, the use of an animal figure.

E.B. White’s use of an animal protagonist to portray a disability may be seen as problematic in that Stuart is not “human,” and might further stereotypes of the disabled as monsters and abnormal. However, the productive use of animal figures in place of people has a long tradition in children’s literature. As Roger Sale writes in Fairy Tales and After: From Snow White to E.B. White, “The animals in question are creatures who talk or in other ways act like human beings. They are present in most children’s literature, ancient and modern, and they are the major source of the power of the best children’s literature” (77). Children can imagine animal characters as people. The representation of characters as animals does not interfere with understanding of the text’s message. In Narratives of Love and Loss, Margaret and Michael Rustin write:
For children, the boundary between internal and external reality is more fragile and permeable than it is for most adults. This creates a propensity for make-believe, and for the investing of imaginary creations with strong feelings and self-identifications... we think it is far from fanciful to see real societies refracted in the imaginary worlds of children’s books.”

(19,25)

Therefore, the presentation of an animal protagonist with a disability, particularly one portrayed realistically with real challenges and triumphs, is seen by a child reader as a real participant in a real world, not as strictly make-believe.

Stuart’s social adaptation to his environment, and the environment to him, begin as soon as he is born. Because Stuart is “as small as a mouse,” physical accommodations need to be made for him to allow him to comfortably live in the Little household and the world. The social construction model of disability is very much in evidence when these accommodations are discussed, which they are frequently. Stuart interacts as an equal with his family and with the world outside, in the making of these accommodations.

For instance, Stuart’s family’s adjustments start the first day he is born, when his mother “saw right away that the infant clothes she had provided were unsuitable, so she... made him a fine little blue worsted suit.” Mr. Little “made him a tiny bed out of four clothespins and a cigarette box” (White 2). In Living with Difference, Ablon emphasizes the importance of “logistics” in helping little
people negotiate their houses and outside world: “Some parents cut down the
furniture in their child’s room to be compatible with the size of the inhabitant…
one parent stated his opinion on this issue: ‘Everyone should have a place to hide.
The child should at least be able to be comfortable at home’ (33). The family’s
accommodations show a realistic understanding of the access difficulties Stuart
faces because of his small size. Stuart openly campaigns for physical
accommodations to increase his independence. At one point, Stuart discusses
with his father his difficulty in turning the water on to wash himself in the
morning:

“I can get up onto the faucet all right,” he explained, “but I can’t seem
to turn it on, because I have nothing to brace my feet against.”

“Yes, I know,” his father replied, “that’s the whole trouble.” (White 15)
The two of them devise a way for Stuart to do his morning grooming by himself.
He turns on the bathroom light with a long cord that reaches to the floor, climbs a
rope ladder to the sink, and turns the faucet on with a little hammer. In Claiming
Disability, Linton writes that “Disabled people are often left in the unenviable
position of having to keep up with norms and standards but with no opportunity to
shape them” (Linton 54). In this case, Stuart is allowed to change his external
environment to suit him. Thus, his independence in this basic activity is assured.

Stuart’s family is also sensitive to pejorative language about his size and
appearance – the nursery rhyme “Three Blind Mice” is barred from the house. In
addition, they have a discussion about the poem they read aloud every Christmas, *A Visit From St. Nicholas*:

“Yes,” replied Mrs. Little, “and I think we have better start thinking about the poem ‘Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.’ I think it might embarrass Stuart to hear mice mentioned in such a belittling manner.” (White 10)

The family substitutes the word “louse” for “mouse” in the poem, and “Stuart always thought that the poem went this way” (White 10). Thus the family respects Stuart’s feelings while keeping the family ritual intact. Lennard Davis, in *Enforcing Normalcy*, speaks of novels that have “normalizing devices of plot to bring deviant characters back into the norms of society” (48). The family makes no attempt to “normalize” Stuart to accept the offensive ritual; instead, they change their norms.

Stuart’s family also allows him to travel in New York City by himself, where he negotiates accommodations and educates non-disabled people who make insensitive remarks. Stuart has great success in his interactions with strangers who don’t respect him because of his size. When he ventures onto Fifth Avenue, “nobody noticed him, because he wasn’t tall enough to be noticed” (White 17). However, he thinks to himself, “I’m not tall enough to be noticed... yet I’m tall enough to want to go to Seventy-second street.” He successfully boards the bus on the cuff of a man’s pants, but when the conductor tells him, “...
you’re no bigger than a dime yourself,” Stuart corrects him and retorts, “I didn’t come on this bus to be insulted.” Chastened, the conductor states, “You’ll have to forgive me, for I had no idea that in all the world there was such a small sailor” (White 29). The conductor now is able to see Stuart, and also now knows how to treat Stuart. Stuart’s attempts to correct others are always successful in the book. In Claiming Disability, Simi Linton writes, “[D]isabled people are rarely depicted… in fiction as being in control of their own lives – in charge or actively seeking out and obtaining what they want or need” (25). Stuart is a refreshing counterexample to this belief, and his assertiveness probably reflects the author’s chosen optimistic tone of the book, since it is written for children. However, there is no other perceived choice for Stuart. He is determined to go to Central Park, and one suspects that he would have found a way, even if the conductor had prevented him. Stuart’s resourcefulness is intentionally written into the book and can be seen as a type of advocacy for the disabled and their efforts to be more physically independent.

Stuart’s bus ride is preparatory to him sailing on Central Park pond on a model boat, but this extended passage is not just a lark for Stuart. He approaches the owner of a model boat and asks to sail it across the Central Park pond:

“Excuse me, sir,” said Stuart to the man who was turning her, “but are you the owner of the schooner Wasp?”
“I am,” replied the man, surprised to be addressed by a mouse in a sailor suit. (White 32)

The ship owner Stuart addresses “couldn’t help admiring the trim appearance and bold manner of this diminutive seafaring character” (White 32). Stuart impresses the boat owner and gets offered work first by the owner – “You sail the Wasp across the pond and back . . . and I’ll give you a regular job” – then by a rival – “I’ll pay you five dollars a week and you can have every Thursday off” (White 33, 37). Stuart sails the Wasp through waves and other obstacles, and his small size causes no problems in his interactions with the boat owner and others at the park, because he proves himself as a good sailor. Stuart also calls out to shore from his boat and is heard easily.

Stuart’s two job offers underscore the fact that Stuart is easily employable in the world of larger people. He is not an economic liability. The reader can see into Stuart’s future in the sailing passage, and he is vital and engaged with the world. His offers of employment are different from the tasks he has been asked to do around his house by his own family, which are discussed later. Boat-racing has the potential to be gainful employment for Stuart. In a world where discrimination by employers can lead to economic hardship for the disabled, Stuart’s ability to find employment is an important factor in his independence. Stuart’s sailing of the boats is also an example of his using his small size to his own advantage. He never denies he is small, but sees usefulness in his size, as
well as a way to fit into the world. Linton defines the cultural narrative of the disabled community as “an account of the world negotiated from the vantage point of the atypical”... the cultural stuff of the community is the creative response to atypical experience, the adaptive maneuvers through a world configured for nondisabled people” (5). Stuart is able to adapt in the area of employment, in a large city full of non-disabled people. Oliver argues that a change from agricultural to industrial society excluded many disabled people from working in factory jobs, due to strict physical requirements and employers’ unwillingness to make accommodations. In 1945, when *Stuart Little* was published, there was no ADA to help disabled people find work. However, Stuart asks for and receives accommodations from people, making him easily employable, which means he can live independently if he so desires.

Car ownership is another step in Stuart’s independence. In *Little People in America*, Joan Ablon emphasizes the importance of little people being able to drive, stating, “Car modifications are considered important enough to merit any cost for dwarfs, who perhaps more than other people, place great practical and symbolic significance on mobility and the social independence connected with it” (76). Stuart is given a real miniature car to drive, by the owner of the racing boat he meets in Central Park, thus ensuring he can travel freely. Interestingly, the person who gives it to him points out the “invisibility button” that would allow
Stuart to presumably become invisible along with the car. Stuart decides to never use it; he does not want to hide. Stuart has no diffidence because of his size.

Despite Stuart’s facility with the outside world, in his interactions with strangers, people at Central Park, and bus conductors, there are tensions in his life, particularly in his relationship with his family. The book does hint that Stuart’s size causes his family some difficult moments, often centered on fears of “losing” Stuart. Most of the time this is discussed openly but sometimes “when Stuart wasn’t around… they had never quite recovered from the shock and surprise of having a mouse in the family. He was so very tiny and he presented so many problems to his parents” (White 9). These problems are generally in the vein of Stuart being “shut up” somewhere, unable to get free – two examples are the refrigerator and a window shade.

However, some of the danger to Stuart is caused by his family. It is notable that Stuart’s physical safety is threatened only when he is at home, possibly because they often walk the boundary between allowing Stuart his freedom and putting him at risk. His father makes him a red hunting cap to increase his visibility, but even so, “You would come into a room, and he might be curled up in a chair, but you wouldn’t see him. Mr. Little was in constant fear of losing him and never finding him again” (46). Or, though it is not stated, of squashing him. Stuart’s father gives him the rather dangerous gift of ice skates. The family keeps their pet cat after Stuart is born. This portrayed as innocent
insensitivity on the family’s part, and it serves the purpose of allowing Stuart to
educate his family about proper treatment of him. This conflict also leads Stuart
to his most important goal: independence.

From Stuart’s point of view, sometimes the problem is that his small size,
although useful, is used by the family in a somewhat exploitative way. Stuart is
asked by his family to do unpleasant jobs around the tiny spaces in the house. For
instance, the family enlists Stuart to go down a drain after Mrs. Little’s lost ring.
He retrieves the ring without complaint, but “the drain had made him very slimy”
(White 6). At another time, Stuart is asked to retrieve lost ping-pong balls and
push up a sticky key in the piano, when someone was playing it, and “Sometimes
after a long session he would emerge quite deaf” (White 9). Perhaps these are just
considered Stuart’s “normal” chores in the household, but the unpleasantness of
these jobs hints at a tension between Stuart and his family, seeming to spring out
of his self-acceptance and urge for independence.

Simi Linton labels this mode of using a disabled person “tolerant
utilization,” specifically “being utilized as needed by the society [in] situations in
which they are considered more useful or practical in certain roles than
nondisabled people” (Linton 51). Although Stuart is useful to the family in doing
these tasks, they always cause him (non-lasting) physical harm or disgust. Stuart
is portrayed by White as a fastidious fellow who is not suited to dirty jobs. White
seems to be hinting that Stuart has a personality conflict with his family that has
little to do with his size. Like some children, he has little in common with his relatives. Stuart’s family sometimes does appear ambivalent about him as well. While obviously fond of him, they never achieve the level of comfort with him that strangers do. His brother George seems jealous of him, ironically because Stuart is more talented and popular than he is. Stuart does not join in the family’s leisure activities. The family does not go out with Stuart; he ventures alone. The family condones Stuart’s solo adventures; they seem to feel he gets along better by himself.

Some might see the family’s treatment of Stuart in a more sinister light. In her essay “Species Trouble: The Abjection of Adolescence in E.B. White’s Stuart Little,” Marah Gubar calls the book “an underground extermination narrative” (101) and argues that Stuart’s family never becomes comfortable with Stuart’s physical difference and implicitly acts in way to compel him to leave home permanently. However, their relationship appears more subtle than a simple wish to have Stuart be gone. Stuart tolerates his family’s errors and wishes for independence as strongly as his family encourages it; he does not resent their hands-off attitude towards him.

Stuart’s distant relationship with family can ultimately be seen in a positive light. From the beginning of the novel, Stuart moves toward his eventual departure from the family, springing as he does half-grown from his mother’s womb, and bonding most strongly to another non-family member, the bird,
Margalo. Stuart’s relationship with Margalo is significant because of its equity. Stuart and Margalo enjoy a relationship that is free of tension. First of all, they are the same size; there is no danger of them hurting each other accidentally. Also, there is no “tolerant utilization” between Stuart and Margalo; they simply enjoy each other’s company. They do not need to educate each other in how to treat creatures of diminutive size. Also, perhaps Stuart feels more affinity with a bird than with a human, being a mouse, and being of too much interest to dogs and cats, as birds are. Stuart’s relationship with Margalo assists him in separating from his family, even from the beginning; they encourage the relationship.

Margalo gives Stuart a view of himself as more powerful; he is no longer the only “little one” in the family after she arrives. When he meets Margalo, he has just recovered from another episode of the family losing him in the refrigerator. Mrs. Little rescues Margalo from the windowsill of their apartment; she has been blown there by a storm. Stuart soon takes over her care and appropriately worries that the family cat will attack her (the rest of the family does not consider the cat a threat). He sneaks downstairs alone to catch the cat getting ready to spring on the bird, and saves her life. “‘This is the finest thing I have ever done,’ thought Stuart” (White 55). Stuart begins to form an identity as Margalo’s friend and protector, rather than strictly a member of the Little family. Margalo returns the favor to Stuart, rescuing him from a garbage scow. She tells him, “I happened to see you get dumped in the garbage truck so I flew out the
window and followed the truck, thinking you might need help” (63). In contrast to Stuart’s family, Margalo is not responsible for Stuart’s physical misadventures, just for helping him get out of them. She flies him home; on the way, he drops the family gift of the ice skates so he is lighter for her to carry. He does not feel badly about this. Perhaps he has always known that he would never use them. This scene illustrates a shift in Stuart’s allegiance from his family to Margalo.

Finally, it is Margalo who inspires Stuart’s departure from his family. Stuart leaves to find the missing Margalo; he makes his decision within the space of twenty-four hours. He hops in his car and leaves to search for Margalo, but he also thinks, “While I am about it, I might as well seek my fortune, too” (White 73). The narrative compels one to think that Stuart was never meant to live his whole life with his natural family, although he does take a strand of his mother’s hair with him, as any grown child leaving home might do.

Stuart’s departure does not seem to be a tragedy, because Stuart is not a child anymore. He is obviously a young adult and ready to be on his own when the search for Margalo gives him the reason and opportunity to leave home. He has little difficulty navigating the world and makes friends on the road just as easily as he did in the city. He even finds temporary employment while on the road. Stuart’s employment as a substitute teacher is interesting in several ways. First of all, despite his size he manages to take total control of the classroom: “He stalked boldly into the room, found a yardstick leaning against Miss Gunderson’s
desk, and climbed hand-over-hand to the top” (White 87). He proceeds to teach the children in his own strange fashion, and the class is a success. We learn in this passage that Stuart can read, although no mention of his attending school had come up before. Stuart’s teaching job is also an opportunity to teach the kids about treatment of the disabled. In a discussion about “running the world,” Stuart states,

“The world gets into a lot of trouble because it has no chairman. I would like to be Chairman of the World myself.”

“You’re too small,” said Mary Bendix.

“Oh, fish feathers!” said Stuart. “Size has nothing to do with it.” (White 92)

That E.B. White, in this short passage, could so casually but beautifully teach tolerance of the physically different, and self-acceptance of small size, is marvelous.

The most notable thing about his teaching job, however, is that Stuart is again shown to be capable of making a living. His teaching style is lackadaisical – “Bother arithmetic!” snapped Stuart. “Let’s skip it.” – but the students love him (White 90). In his own way, he is a successful teacher. Since he earns money, he also slips easily into the consumer culture, buying groceries and gasoline while on the road:
At the edge of town he found a filling station and stopped to take on some gas. “Five, please,” said Stuart to the attendant. The man looked at the tiny automobile in amazement. “Five what?” he asked.

“Five drops,” said Stuart. But the man shook his head and said he couldn’t sell such a small amount of gas.

“Why can’t you?” demanded Stuart. “You need the money and I need the gas. Why can’t we work something out between us?” (White 125)

As the above passage illustrates, Stuart is still educating others about adapting to a person of small size, and he is still wonderfully adept at it.

Unless he is thinking of Margalo in romantic terms, which is not clear in the book, Stuart’s future plans do not include marriage, although this possibility is hinted at in the text, in one of the most complex scenes in the book. In his travels, a shopkeeper suggests that he meet up with a young woman, Harriet Ames. This young woman “[is] the only girl Stuart had ever encountered who wasn’t miles and miles taller than he was” (White 107). Again, White has presented a choice for Stuart. He may marry another person the same size as himself. Harriet is described to Stuart and he knows they are physically well suited. When he writes a letter to her, asking to meet, he writes, “.... The fact is, as you yourself must know, there are very few people who are only two inches in height” (White 109). Although Stuart decides rather quickly that he will not stay in Harriet’s town and
prefers to continue looking for Margalo, this decision seems based on Stuart’s restless wish to keep traveling.

In including the vignette with Harriet, White leaves open the possibility of romantic love to Stuart, and the possibility of a complete life, if a domestic household is part of that life. This scene with Harriet foreshadows one possible future for Stuart, but the reader does not know if he will ever choose it. It is entirely up to Stuart. The famous open-ended finish to the book, with Stuart traveling north, his destination unknown, is the perfect ending to this disability narrative. Stuart is in charge of his own fate and realistic about how difficult his journey will be: “the way seemed long” (White 131). However, Stuart is powerful and self-determined, and very much in the world, not on the periphery.

*Stuart Little* is a text that would be a great teaching tool for children, in the positive representation of an under-represented, or mis-represented, cultural group, the disabled. He is simply a little person (or mouse) making a meaningful life. There is no emphasis on “fixing” his size, but he does attempt to fix his world so he can play a valuable part in it. He finds employment, has friends, travels, and makes choices about his future. Stuart is ahead of his time. Although his size presents logistical problems for him, he is active in overcoming them. He is capable of earning a living and does not suffer discrimination in finding employment. Stuart has a full life, and has potential for a future life that the reader can only imagine. As Steven Lukes states in *Individualism:*
[E]quality and liberty... can only be achieved on the basis of a view of unabstracted individuals in their concrete, social specificity, who in virtue of being persons, all require to be treated and to live in a social order which treats them as possessing dignity, as capable of exercising and increasing their autonomy, of engaging in value activities... and of developing their several potentialities. (Lukes 153)

It is interesting to note these words were quoted in Oliver’s book, *The Politics of Disablement*, which was published in 1990. In *Stuart Little*, a children’s book, is a character who epitomizes these social disability ideals.
CHAPTER TWO

E.B. White’s *Stuart Little* is a straightforward celebration of social disability ideals, with a self-accepting protagonist who models confidence and authority. E.B. White’s last book, *The Trumpet of the Swan*, ultimately also honors body difference, but his protagonist takes a longer journey to self-acceptance. The protagonist’s fears about his disability and his future and his struggles to find a “home” where he feels comfortable, add more nuance to the discussion of disability in children’s literature. *The Trumpet of the Swan* was published in 1970. White acknowledged that he wrote the book to alleviate money worries, and according to Scott Elledge in *E.B. White: A Biography*, “He was dissatisfied with the book, and after he had turned it in he wished he had held it a year and then rewritten it, as he had done with his other children’s books” (345). This book contains a disabled protagonist, Louis, but perhaps because of White’s haste in publishing the book, the protagonist is more ambivalently portrayed than in *Stuart Little*. Louis’s physical difference causes him and his family distress, in contrast to Stuart Little. Louis uses pejorative language to describe himself, unlike Stuart Little, but this does not prevail throughout the novel. Like Stuart, Louis finds employment and ends up leading a free life. Despite his difficulties, Louis’s character is ultimately happy, independent, and powerful.
The main character, Louis, is a male trumpeter swan who is born without a voice. His disability is seen as a liability by himself and his family, and Louis’s mutism is described in negative language. For example, when Louis’s muteness is discovered (by his mother), he is “awfully unhappy” and “frightened at being different from his brothers and sisters” (White 49-51). This negative language supports the argument that Lennard Davis makes in *Enforcing Normalcy* that in society, “All too often, differences are automatically labeled “deformities” (163). In Louis’s society, the “deformity” label appears frequently. Louis and his family refer to his muteness in those terms and to Louis as “defective.” The family’s and Louis’s attention is taken up by his mutism, to the exclusion of his positive qualities.

This description of Louis’s silence as a deformity suggests a stigma, as described by Erving Goffman in *Stigma*: “He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive” (3). In the initial pages of the book, Louis sees himself as imperfect and it scares him. Because of his physical difference, he places the “deformed” label on himself. For example, when he learns to fly, he tempers his happiness by thinking, “I may be defective, but at least I can fly” (White 60). Louis’s ambivalence about his worth as an imperfect swan may closely mirror a child’s internalization of his/her disability as a “defect.” White may have included this pejorative language in the book to
acknowledge and argue against a society that labels a disability as a “deformity,” and to challenge unthinking self-labeling in children.

Louis’s mutism is a literary device that White chose for the book to set up a moral conflict that Louis is compelled, through the story’s plot, to resolve. Louis’s voiceless state at the outset is seen by himself and others as a potentially disastrous problem for the plot to advance. However, in his choice of how to present the mutism, White has left himself vulnerable to criticism by disability studies scholars because the words he chose (“defect,” “deformity”) mean that he, to quote Linton, “is deficient in language to describe [disability] any other way than as a ‘problem’” (140). However, the novel gains in complexity, as does Louis, as he is presented with moral conflicts to resolve, and tests to his creativity in negotiating the world without spoken language. Louis’s “problem” of silence makes him unique and powerful.

The negative language to describe Louis is mitigated very early in the book by the acceptance Louis feels from his family, and by his acquisition of the skills he needs as a swan. For example, when his parents discuss his mutism and what problems it may present for Louis, his mother resolves, “We must stay together as a family until we see how Louis makes out” (White 45). Louis also learns to fly sooner than his siblings do, after some anxiety that he will fail and be “left behind to starve.” From the point in the book that he learns to fly, he has no
physical difficulty whatsoever. Interpreting Louis’s silence as a point of plot tension ameliorates the pejoratives used early in the book.

Louis’s parents accept him as silent, with only one objection: they worry that he will have difficulty finding a mate. His mother states, “[This] will be serious two or three years from now when Louis falls in love... [a] young male swan will be greatly handicapped in finding a mate if he is unable to say ko-hoh, ko-hoh...” (White 4). Louis’s disability is perceived by his parents as seriously inhibiting his ability to attract the opposite sex, as Erving Goffman in Stigma describes it, “effectively reducing his life chances” (5). Therefore, his mutism may actually erase him from his social group, if he cannot find a mate and reproduce. When his problem is presented to him in this light, it becomes worthwhile for him to solve it, for his personal happiness. This is in contrast to Stuart Little, where his ability to find a mate is not questioned. White broadens this topic and makes it a focal point of The Trumpet of the Swan, in contrast to the superficial treatment it receives in the earlier novel.

His father involves himself in finding a solution for Louis, and in doing so sets the plot in action. Louis gains a prosthetic voice, through a trumpet his father steals and presents to him. Louis does not approve of his father’s theft, and it is clear throughout the book that no one in the swan family approves of it either. However, Louis willingly takes the prosthetic voice and uses it. The trumpet has another function in the book – Louis learns to play music on it so he can perform
for humans and make restitution for his father’s crime. The trumpet becomes a way to make money, and also increases Louis’s self-worth, since he becomes very talented at playing it. The trumpet will also function for Louis during mating time, as a substitute for the swan’s regular call. The instrument has an entirely positive effect on Louis’s life and self-image. Louis becomes an extremely attractive employee, just as Stuart Little does, and his talents are valued even more highly than Stuart’s. Disability is never an economic liability for Louis: he makes more money than he can use.

However, to play the trumpet and make money, Louis must enter the human world and communicate with people. Louis, unlike Stuart, is not born of humans. Louis decides to learn English to find employment. White accomplishes this learning through the conduit of Sam Beaver, Louis’s only human friend in the novel. Sam Beaver has a role in this novel much like Margalo’s in Stuart Little. Sam encourages Louis’s independence and helps him find work. Louis and Sam meet when Louis is only one day old; Louis unties Sam Beaver’s sneaker, and thus they communicate without vocalization throughout the novel. Sam Beaver is Louis’s conduit in the human world. He intercedes on behalf of Louis several times with humans. In exchange, Louis allows Sam close access to what he loves most – nature and wildlife. Like Margalo, Sam Beaver is a person who neither comments on Louis’s mutism nor wishes Louis to perform for him. He enters the story incidentally, like Margalo. Sam, like Margalo with Stuart, allows Louis to
make future plans. Sam also lessens the tension in the novel between Louis and his fellow swans, and Louis and the human world.

Louis must enter the human world for one reason – to make money and pay for the stolen trumpet. His one-track goal leads to well-rounded and positive experience. As in Stuart Little, his attempts at traveling, learning, and meeting new people are successful. His first step is to attend school: “I will learn to read and write... perhaps... Sam will let me go to school with him, and the teacher will show me how to write” (White 62-63). Sam integrates Louis into the human classroom, gaining the teacher’s sympathy without labeling Louis, simply stating to the teacher that Louis needs to learn English because “…he can’t say ko-hoh the way other swans can, and this puts him at a terrible disadvantage” (White 70). Louis does wonder if “…a young swan would be accepted in a classroom full of children” (White 63). Only the teacher objects, but Sam convinces her to accept Louis into the human school, and “The first-graders [cheer]” (White 71). Louis learns to write in English, on a slate, using his bill. This scene illustrates a major shift in the novel. Louis wishes to be accepted by humans, but any prejudice he encounters is not because he is silent, but because he is an animal. Sam is instrumental in helping Louis overcome this prejudice. Thus, Louis is mainstreamed into a regular classroom.

Louis’s writing slate really functions as a second prosthesis, the first being his horn. The slate is used exclusively in the human world. It allows Louis to
communicate with potential employers regarding the terms of his jobs and payment. However, the slate is not meant to be used in the world of the swans. He does try out the slate with his family, once. He returns to his home pond briefly and writes an English phrase on the slate: “Hi, there!” The swans do not understand this greeting: “The cygnets stared at it. They just stared and stared. Words on a slate meant nothing to them… Louis’s attempt to greet his family was a failure” (White 82). It is possible that White wrote this scene to show that Louis has come back to his family too early, before he has learned to integrate his tools and use them appropriately. However, there is never doubt in Louis’s mind about his ultimate reunification with his family. He is a swan in a family of swans.

Contrasting with Stuart Little, in which Stuart lives comfortably in the human world as a mouse, no one ever forgets that Louis is a swan, least of all himself. He does move between the swan and human world and functions well in both, but it is clear from the above scene that the two worlds do not intersect. Louis’s use of two prosthetic devices, and his choice of where and when to use them, eases his difficulties in communicating in the human world. Louis chooses the prosthetic devices to make his communication with humans possible. In contrast, Stuart Little communicates with people easily, but uses a little car to travel, and improvises ways to get to high places. Louis’s use of the prosthetic devices can be seen as practical ways to engage and maneuver in the world, particularly in regard to gaining employment, which is Louis’s main goal.
Louis’s first foray into active employment parallels a decrease in negative language in the book to describe him. Sam takes him to his summer camp, Camp Kookooskoos, to work as a bugler. The camp counselor introduces Louis to the other campers in a relatively tactful way:

“We are lucky to have him... he is gentle and has a speech defect...Louis is a musician. Like most musicians, he is in need of money.” (White 113)

Louis’s talent as a musician is already a key positive aspect of his identity. The counselor reinforces the strength of Louis as well: “I caution you to treat him as an equal and to treat him with respect – he packs a terrific wallop with one of those wings” (White 114). Some prejudice expressed about Louis because he is a bird – a common initial reaction to him among humans – is dispelled when he saves a child from drowning. The head counselor praises him, “He is our most distinguished counselor – a great trumpet player, a great bird, a powerful swimmer, and a fine friend” (White 131). Louis’s image is uniformly positive among humans – “Louis’s fame was growing” (White 133). Louis’s self-image changes because of the employment, and he never refers to himself as “deformed” while playing the trumpet.

Louis’s job at the camp ends, but his working career is just starting. In seeking further employment, he asks Sam for help and Sam has a great suggestion: “Sam sat down on his bed and thought for awhile. Then he said, ‘Go
to Boston. Maybe you can get a job with the Swan Boat”" (White 136). This he does, by approaching the man in charge and writing on his slate: “Have trumpet. Need work” (White 142). Louis’s entry into the working world, via his trumpet playing and slate, are as surprising and encouraging as Stuart Little’s. Louis is seen as an oddity, but he is soon respected as an excellent player, and enjoys playing: “He loved the sound of his own trumpet” (White 130). Louis is physically different but employable; he never lacks work and although he is hired because he is a swan, he becomes popular because he is talented.

Interestingly, Louis’s talent as a musician is used to comic effect by White to underscore his acceptance by humans, and as a way to eliminate the negative language used to describe him earlier in the book. There is no reference to “deformity” in the human world in regards to Louis. Several people initially object to Louis’s presence in the human world because he is a swan, but later they object to him because he is a musician. The interaction among Louis, a hotel concierge and Louis’s manager, when Louis attempts to obtain a hotel room, is amusing: “Will he mess the room all up? Actors are bad enough. Musicians are worse” (White 156). Louis assures the concierge that he will not act as a musician, but as a polite swan. White uses humor to frame the point that Louis has been accepted by humans. It does not matter that he is a swan; as long as he acts like a “civilized musician” he will not be thrown out. The only complaint he generates from the management is when he plays his trumpet in the room.
Louis's interactions with humans can be seen from the social construction perspective of disability. In the human world, accommodations are made for him when he makes it clear he has value in the human society. Louis's increasingly positive experience parallels Stuart Little's experience in a world full of larger people and objects – both Stuart and Louis are capable of holding their own against hostility or misunderstanding by larger people.

Louis has a positive, businesslike relationship with his human employers, but the question remains as to whether Louis is being exploited by humans because he is a swan. The answer is complicated in this book. Louis initially is hired to play on a "swan boat" – a boat shaped like a swan that transports people across a pond. The owner of the boat does not consider Louis's playing skill so much as the novelty of a swan playing music on a swan boat. On Louis's part, his primary goal in playing the trumpet is to pay off this debt, so he can return to his family of swans and find a mate. He never considers returning the trumpet to the store from which it was stolen; he needs it to attract a female. He likes playing the trumpet but hates the late hours in clubs. The humans enjoy the music but also cannot get enough of the spectacle of a swan playing the trumpet.

In "The Politics of Staring," Rosemarie Garland Thomson defines the relationship that most likely exists between Louis and his human listeners: "Staring at disability choreographs a visual relation between a spectator and a spectacle" (56). Louis is aware that he is initially a spectacle for people. Is he
simply presented as a weird spectacle, thereby erasing the positive portrayal of his physical difference? One needs to evaluate how Louis’s audience perceives him – or how they look at him. Garland Thomson defines a “taxonomy of four primary visual rhetorics of disability. They are the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic and the realistic” (58). Louis’s performance fits squarely into two of these visual rhetorics – the wondrous and the exotic. Garland Thomson defines the wondrous as “[capitalizing] on physical differences in order to elicit amazement and admiration” (59). She defines the exotic rhetoric as “[presenting] disabled figures as alien, distant, often sensationalized, eroticized or entertaining in their difference” (65). Louis generates headlines for his playing: “Boston Goes Wild Over the Trumpet of the Swan” (White 102). It is obvious he has generated a sense of wonder with his playing, but the exotic is apparent here as well. An illustration in the book of Louis playing in a smoky club, wearing sunglasses, is comic yet unsettling. When he plays this job in Philadelphia, “He [does] not like this job at all,” mostly because of the late hours (White 178). However, if the initial exotic and wondrous gaze is present, it is soon ameliorated by Louis’s treatment by humans. Louis’s audience and employers always treat him with respect; he never feels harassed or exploited. He makes good money and negotiates time off and good living conditions (i.e., the hotel). Playing the trumpet in clubs is not his long-term goal for life, but he is never miserable.
In the end of the book, Louis is able to leave the world of performing for money (he plays later, but only for enjoyment). Louis earns enough money to pay back the music shop for the stolen trumpet. (He makes his father pay the shop owner.) Louis returns to the lake and the swans, and attracts a mate with his trumpet: “She succumbed completely to this charmer, this handsome musician” (White 196). His goal of attracting a mate is at least as important as paying off his father’s debt. The trumpet acts as a prosthetic voice in the mating ritual. In Artificial Parts, Practical Lives, Katherine Ott writes of the importance in the human world of prosthetics for just this purpose: “One indication of a prosthesis’s success, mentioned through professional literature on prostheses, is that the wearer be able to participate in courtship rituals; the ultimate accomplishment is marriage” (9). The trumpet ensures this accomplishment for Louis.

However, Louis’s mating generates one last tension in the book – once he finds a mate, he is ready to leave the human world, but they do not want him to leave. He has found his mate, Serena, on a lake in a preserve, and the humans want them both to stay there. Two swans and their children would attract visitors. When the keepers at the preserve attempt to pinion his mate, Louis’s reaction reminds the reader that he ultimately will control his fate – where he will live and how: “This is my moment… Nobody is going to clip my Love’s wings when I’m around” (White 200). Louis attacks the keepers: “Louis beat him over the head with his wings, striking terrific blows” (White 202). He uses his slate and his
trumpet to argue with the Head Man that they must leave. He “[walks] boldly in
the Bird House to discuss the issue. The Head Man uses a logical argument to
compel Louis to stay:

“If you and Serena stay here, you’ll be safe. You’ll have no enemies…
What more could a young cob ask?”

“Freedom,” replied Louis on his slate. “Safety is all well and good:
I prefer freedom.” (White 206)

The understanding here is one of a difference of opinion: while the Preserve is a
pleasant and safe place for a swan, Louis prefers living where he grew up instead.
He has no trouble communicating his wants to the Head Man, but also enlists his
friend Sam’s help one more time to intercede with the Head Man. Sam, of
course, understands and sympathizes with Louis’s wish: “Sam knew how Louis
felt about freedom” (White 209). Sam comes up with an interesting compromise.
He tells Louis, “In every family of cygnets, there is always one that needs special
care and protection” (210). He convinces Louis to give the Preserve one of these
cygnets on occasion. Since swans usually produce more than one brood of
cygnets, this will not affect the future generations of Louis’s family.

Louis is now able to live a full life just as he wants – not as a “deformed”
swan with no future life, not as a “spectacle” with humans, but as he chooses, a
free and independent life. Louis is still voiceless, but has made adaptations that
work well for him. Louis is the epitome of social disability change in that he asks
for access, makes changes in his environment, and chooses the life he wants for himself. He finds a way to communicate to find employment, nurtures a talent he has, makes a decision to attract a mate, and builds a strong self-image. Humans and swans come to respect his differences and choices.
CHAPTER THREE

How would a teacher use *Stuart Little* and *The Trumpet of the Swan* as an opportunity to teach about disability and its portrayal, particularly to elementary school children? An opening already exists for discussion of disability — in the multicultural milieu. Consider the definition of culture. According to Alan Purves, in *Cultural Literature and Literacies*, culture is “(a) a set of intellectual beliefs and social practices of a self-defined group of people, and (b) the arts that embody those beliefs” (106-7). Instructors already teach different cultures often through the media of books, books that show a realistic portrayal of a different race or creed. Not only does disability studies fit into a cultural studies definition, teaching disability as a form of multicultural studies might ameliorate under-representation of disabled people in literature. Disability studies is a rich cultural experience, and children’s books are a terrific introduction to it. Yet disability is absent in most classrooms as part of the daily discussion of literature, where an open discussion could lead to tolerance and lessen fear, and break down the fantasy of the “perfect body.”

Disability theorists have written about changing the cultural viewpoint of disability as well. Oliver writes of a flawed social ideology that “makes little attempt to present the collective experience of disability culturally, and hence the process of identity formation for disabled individuals has usually been constrained by images of superheroes or pathetic victims” (62). This constraint is universal
to most marginalized groups, when they are depicted in mainstream literature, until this ideology is pointed out.

The idea of teaching disability as a form of multicultural literature has already been considered by educators. Gregory Morris, in _Multicultural Literature and Literacies_, writes that “a focus on multicultural education which highlights many cultural groups, such as women, handicapped persons, [and] religious groups... is also imperative” (155). Educational theorists, according to the literature, have visited this approach but are also wary. Education experts sometimes feel that adding disability to the mix of multicultural studies complicates an already unwieldy curriculum, and opens up uncontrollable debate as to which groups should be included and which should not. Some feel this debate impedes rather than encourages change in teaching methods. For example, in _Teaching Multicultural Literature in Grades K-8_, Violet Harris discusses her criteria for which groups to cover under multiculturalism:

I wondered about the other groups usually placed under the rubric of multiculturalism: the elderly, gays and lesbians, linguistic and religious minorities, and the disabled. Would I include them? In the end, I decided to concentrate on those who are most excluded and marginalized, people of color. (xvi)

Harris’s conclusion, although she admits it is somewhat arbitrary and personal, would be hotly debated among the excluded groups she cites. I would
argue that there is room in multicultural studies for all the groups she mentioned, including the disabled.

*Stuart Little* and *The Trumpet of the Swan*, because of their strong protagonists with unusual bodies and active plots, would find a strong place in a multicultural curriculum. Both books feature characters who have a strong bond with their environment and friends, and avoid the trap of making the characters immoderately heroic or pitiful. Disability studies scholars have already seen the potential for this approach. Mitchell and Snyder, in *Narrative Prosthesis*, write, “We mean to help locate disability’s place on the map of multicultural studies,” and it can be argued that it is already on the map, but overlooked (2). The sooner disability is accepted as part of multicultural literature (i.e., children’s literature), the less controversial it would be as a teaching topic. There has been some resistance among disability theorists, however. Some, such as Lennard Davis, feel this approach may be too narrow and may categorize the disabled in unwelcome ways, once again making them a “special” group. However, if taught sensitively, it is possible to teach disability as multicultural literature and avoid this pitfall.

Making disability part of multicultural studies may also raise objections if it is done in a superficial way, using poor teaching materials, or with little knowledge of the subject of disability. However, this argument can be made of all representations of difference in multicultural studies. Surely some
“multicultural” works are strictly avoided by teachers because they can increase racial bias or are ineffective in teaching tolerance of other cultures. In *Teaching Multicultural Literature*, Alan Purves writes of the difficulty of expanding a literary canon due to political and cultural resistance by those who have strong opinions about what is taught to children and what societal values it reflects. This discussion has relevance in terms of disability studies because it brings to the forefront the question of what disabled protagonists would teach to readers. Purves writes that reading texts through a multicultural studies lens may “reinforce attitudes and beliefs rather than to effect conversions,” and if a text about disability promotes positive attitudes, no political or religious bias need enter into the discussion (119).

Some creative methods can be used in teaching about disability. For example, Donna Norton suggests a method of teaching multicultural literature that begins with sharing of folklore and myth of a specific culture. A framework for this history and myth may be a discussion of disabled characters in literature of the past. There is a wealth of this type of literature to refer to that can be used to put disability representation into historical context.

A brief discussion of where disability is “located” in a culture, as illustrated by its literature, would serve as a helpful introduction to disability through a multicultural lens. The historical contexts of *The Trumpet of the Swan* and *Stuart Little* are part of their interest in terms of disability representation, and
would make fascinating class discussion. For example, in *Stuart Little* and *The Trumpet of the Swan*, it would be more culturally relevant to the students to take time to discuss the time period in which they were written and how the social, medical and vocational cultures changed in the time frame from one book’s writing to the other. For example, *Stuart Little* was published in 1945, long before the Americans with Disabilities Act. It was also before ultrasounds or in-utero genetic testing: presumably, Mrs. Little did not know she would have a mouse until Stuart arrived. When Mrs. Little takes Stuart to the doctor, the doctor tells Mrs. Little, “Feed him up!” (White 3). That is the extent of his medical intervention. That there is no medical basis for Stuart being born to a human family is in part explained by the fact that this is a children’s book: the mechanics of species-specific reproduction is not necessary in this genre. However, Stuart’s appearance, it can also be argued, is an argument for acceptance of disability. No one offers to “fix” Stuart; he is accepted as he is, and therefore accepts himself as he is.

A multicultural classroom discussion about *Stuart Little* might also focus in part on dwarfism and historical/cultural representations of it. Dwarves fill the literature with representations ranging from evil to magical, and little people today often feel they fulfill a “mascot” role in society, defined by Ablon in *Little People of America* as the scenario where a dwarf “[capitalizes] on his small size and defines a positive role for himself in the social structure” (18). Dwarves are
often portrayed in literature and movies in this way, most notably in the “Lord of the Rings” trilogy of movies, where the dwarf Gimli is the butt of short jokes. Stuart Little is very different from the “jolly” little person. He has a range of human emotions – he gets moody and sullen, he can be egotistical, he is sometimes sad, happy and self-confident.

One aspect of Stuart’s very realistic emotional life that can really surprise the reader, and would be a good focus of teaching this text, is Stuart’s demands for physical accommodation. He is ADA before ADA existed, in that he advocates for physical access to places that unthinkingly exclude him. The lack of discussion about Stuart’s size and his assertiveness in being included in society are key topics for a cultural studies discussion. Is Stuart’s attitude realistic, particularly pre-ADA? Where does Stuart feel most comfortable? Is it within Stuart’s rights to expect society to accommodate his size? What disability culture is he reflecting? These are all good discussion questions, which can be simplified for elementary school children without diluting their basic importance.

_The Trumpet of the Swan_ brings up multicultural issues of its own, and these are also influenced by the time in which the book is written. This book was published in 1970, also before ADA, and one could argue that Louis’s access problems, while being blamed on his being a swan, are universal to disability. For example, when Louis enters the human world, he encounters discrimination, which he overcomes by proving his independence, strength, and musical talent.
He saves a boy’s life at his first job, at a summer camp, he proves studious at
school, squelching the teacher’s doubts, and he demonstrates talent and money-
making ability as a musician.

The two most important discussion points in *The Trumpet of the Swan* in
terms of multicultural studies are Louis’s freedom to move between the swan and
human society, and the language others use describe his disability. The first
point, his access, would be a good discussion starting point. Is there a “world of
the disabled” and a “world of the nondisabled”? Should there be? Can disabled
people move between those worlds without hiding their disability? Is Louis’s
attitude a key to his acceptance? The second important point is the use of
pejorative language to describe Louis’s mutism. Words like “deformed” are not
used in *Stuart Little*. Could an argument be made that in the more medically
interventional 1970’s, disability was seen as more of a tragedy and not just an
interesting difference, particularly if it could not be “cured”? Is Louis’s mutism a
tragedy? What if one of his children is born mute? What should he do then?

These books are teaching opportunities that do not follow a prescriptive agenda of
what children should think about disability, or even how they would define a
disability. Questions raised would be necessarily complex, but their complexity
and lack of clear answers do not preclude open discussion. This discussion would
go a long way toward explaining the self-acceptance of the protagonists, as well
as the language used to describe their physical difference (“small” versus
"deformed"). This context also explains why these books are so unusual in their treatment of physical difference, and why they would be valuable to a cultural studies discussion.

Both Louis and Stuart make choices about how to live with their disability, and what their identities as physically different mean to them. This integration of a disabled identity could be a stepping stone to discussion about the pervasiveness of disability, a discussion that may seek to blur the imaginary line in many people’s heads between “physically perfect” and “others.” Even Lennard Davis, who believes aligning disability studies with multicultural studies is difficult because of the fluidity of the disability studies definition, writes in *Bending Over Backwards* that:

> Given that people with disabilities compose 15% of the population – the largest physical minority in most countries – and that the likelihood that many of the nondisabled today will become the disabled of tomorrow, it is strange that most people are more willing to identify with the struggles of African Americans or gays and lesbians, each of whom comprise a smaller percentage of the total population. As Michael Berube asks, “Why isn’t disability seen as a potentially universal condition – as it most assuredly is?” (36)

Rather than scaring kids with the possibility that they may become disabled, an instructor could gently emphasize the democratic nature of disability, as a way to
present a tolerant and understanding treatment of the disabled in society. One
way for an instructor to do this is to point out that Louis’s and Stuart’s physical
differences can be extrapolated to many disabilities. Stuart is small in stature, but
his difficulties with access can be understood by anyone with a disability that
makes physical movement difficult. Louis’s attempts at communication of course
are reminiscent of a deaf person’s struggle to be understood by a hearing
community. When discussion with students is allowed to grow beyond the limits
of the physical difference written about in these two books, students may
understand the issue of disability as being beyond a specific impairment, more
subtle for some people, and present in everyday life for a large segment of the
population.

An example of students’ awareness of disability in everyday life, though
perhaps “hidden,” is present in Cynthia Lewis’s article, “‘Give People a Chance’: Acknowledging Social Differences in Reading.” She writes of her experiences
teaching a fable to fourth graders, a fable with a clear-cut (so she thinks) moral,
which after hearing the tale, every fourth grader should be able to parrot
effortlessly. But she comes upon a student who refuses to read the fable
“correctly”. Lewis reflects, “I found I had listened selectively to Rick’s
interpretation of the fable as he thought aloud in a way that disregarded his close
reading of the text in favor of my own” (Lewis 455). The story is a benign
narrative about a “pelican” who eats in a messy manner, spilling, crumbs, etc., so
the obvious conclusion drawn (the moral) is that pelican has bad table manners and cannot be invited anywhere. However, the interesting thing about Rick’s reading of the fable is that he sees it as a disability narrative, an interpretation which the author admits she completely missed:

Teacher: What do we know now?

Rick: That he’s a klutz! [My] mom’s a klutz.

Teacher: The things that your mom does kind of hurt her, right?

What about the things that Pelican does?

Rick: Well, he stains... he can stain things.

Teacher: He can stain things... He can mess things up for other people, then?

Rick: Maybe... he can’t eat right.

Teacher: What might be a lesson for you if every time you went to your friend’s house, you were really messy?

Rick: Just don’t eat? (spoken softly). (457)

To Lewis’s credit, after this discussion she comes to the realization that she is leading Rick to the seemingly only obvious moral of the story – messy people do not have friends. Lewis writes, “I did not question the social origins of my thinking about the text... I resisted Rick’s reading because it did not match my own... received knowledge” (458). As this example illustrates, a teaching opportunity exists in all novels with disabled characters, particularly from the
point of view of the inclusive nature of disability. “Rick” understood the animal’s limitations as perhaps being out of the animal’s control, just as disability can be out of a person’s control. Thus, the animal’s shunning by his peers may be due to misunderstanding and fear. If this story was taught as a way for students to understand the different realities of how people eat, and their inherent worth despite these differences, it would be a more valuable teaching tool.

The openness of students to this type of interpretation and empathy seems unlimited. Rudine Sims Bishop writes in “Multicultural Literature for Children” that “If literature is a mirror that reflects human life, then all children who read or are read to need to see themselves reflected as part of humanity” (43). In other words, teaching disability as multicultural literature can help erase intolerance and misunderstanding, and the polarization between “normal” and “non-normal” bodies. This change can and should begin with children.

Discussing issues of disabled representation in literature opens up a perspective of greater visibility for disability’s meaning and place in the cultural landscape. The above descriptions of the viability and universalism of multicultural studies parallel the ideas of the social construction of disability. This opens up a teaching opportunity for students learning about the limitations placed upon their environments, why they are placed there, and how to remove them. If *Stuart Little* and *Trumpet of the Swan* were taught to primary school classes with this emphasis, the seeds for open discussion and tolerance are
planted. Broadening awareness of everyone’s world is what multicultural
literature is supposed to do. The beauty of teaching *The Trumpet of the Swan* and
*Stuart Little* from a multicultural perspective is that both the protagonists are born
with disability, and despite uses of prosthetics and adaptive equipment, the
disabilities are permanent, much as race and ethnicity are permanent. This is
important because any classroom discussion can focus on changing one’s
environment, one’s attitude and the attitudes of others, not on “fixing” the (in this
case) permanent disability. Garland Thomson writes

> Disabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction as
> uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations
> operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or
> producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability’s cultural
> relevance. (9)

Books for children that make disability the main focus of the plot often have
some of the drawbacks mentioned above, which dilute the message of
tolerance and understanding of disability. They are often solely about a
disabled protagonist and are “single message” stories. John Quicke in

*Disability in Modern Children’s Fiction* labels these types of books “quasi-
fiction” and states they fail as good literature (135). They tend to be narrowly
focused books which “in trying to impart information and tell a story… do
neither very well” (139). Quicke states that reviewers are often too kind to
books featuring a disabled protagonist because “it is too often assumed that any book where a disabled person is a central character ‘serves an important goal’” (6).

Notwithstanding that books about disability that young people read should not be overly complicated, they should at least be stories that children (and adults) want to read. A one-dimensional book that portrays disabled people as fully defined by their disability sabotages the attitude that should be emphasized – that there is a narrative in existence in which the disabled lead full lives and effect changes in their environment to improve access and happiness for themselves. Classroom criteria for literature about the disabled were developed by Joan Blaska and E.C. Lynch. They call these criteria “The Images & Encounters Profile.” The profile’s guidelines for a “better” children’s book featuring disability include that the story:

1. Promotes empathy not pity.
2. Depicts acceptance not ridicule.
3. Emphasizes success rather than, or in addition to, failure.
4. Promotes positive images of persons with disabilities or illness.
5. Assists children in gaining accurate understanding of the disability or illness.
6. Demonstrates respect for persons with disabilities or illness.
7. Promotes attitude of “one of us” not “one of them.”
8. Uses language which stresses person first, disability second philosophy (i.e. Jody who is blind).

9. Describes the disability or person with disabilities or illness as realistic (i.e., not subhuman or superhuman).

10. Illustrates characters in a realistic manner. (2)

Neither Stuart nor Louis is uncomplicated or alien; each retains a basic identity as a real character, despite having physical limitations. Both are as well-rounded as any human person, with the same desire for respect, happiness, and autonomy as anyone. They are also interesting characters with interesting lives, which is the result of them inhabiting well-written books that focus on their activities and personalities, not just their disabilities. An opportunity exists in these books to teach children about physical difference through the experiences of a realistic protagonist. Disabled people are an integral part of the cultural landscape, and have their own stories. To tell these stories in a positive, interesting way would help round out an elementary education program.
CONCLUSION

E.B. White’s children’s novels, although not written specifically about disability, are ripe literature for discussing issues affecting the disabled community at present, including value of life, social access, use of language, and the “politics of staring.” These novels underscore the difficulties of writing books that include realistic, respectful representations of the disabled as potentially powerful, happy people who are part of a continuum of the human race, not placed in the “non-normate” category. Is the genre of children’s literature an appropriate place to raise these questions and discussions? These books facilitate discussions about what it is like to be a disabled person in society – therefore it seems it would never be too early to start this discussion. Children notice difference, and adults are not always equipped to handle their questions in ways that are inclusive and affirming to everyone. In her essay “Disabled Students Come Out,” Georgina Kleege writes of the problem of the questioner asking a disabled person “What’s wrong with you?”:

What was wrong with the question was the way it assumed that we people with disabilities perceive ourselves to be defective, deficient, substandard, that we long for the abilities we lack, experiencing eye envy, leg envy, ear envy. A better though more challenging answer to the question would be to say, “There is nothing wrong with being disabled.” (312)
Or, as Stuart Little would say, “I didn’t come on this bus to be insulted” (White 29).

In his essay “The Disabilitymaking Factory,” Santiago Solis states that, “[W]e recognize] the power and influence of children’s literature. [C]hildren’s books possess the rare and extraordinary opportunity to expose stereotypes, and challenge misconceptions” (6). This is true if high quality texts are used and meaningful questions are asked in discussion.

Teaching *Stuart Little* and *The Trumpet of the Swan* as examples of a positive, social model of disability enable a larger viewpoint of society as a continuum of physical difference, with a cultural location for every person instead of a “right” or “wrong” physical criteria. Michael Oliver, in his writing about the social model, states that when disability is seen only as “a minority group,” formed to call more attention to the needs of the disabled, a special problem is created:

Such strategies would inevitably look like special pleading and further, move away from the strategies disabled people have chosen for themselves; that is, the personal and public affirmation of disabled identities and the demands that disabled people be accepted by and integrated into society as they are; that is, as disabled people. (Oliver 106)

Stuart Little and Louis are unusual, but do not engage in “special pleading.” The lives they have chosen for themselves are an everyday positive representation.
In her article “What Disability Studies Can Do for Children’s Literature,” Kathy Saunders asserts that “Critical analysis informed by the social model of disability may hasten a ... situation regarding disability, when texts for children will identify social attitudes as the true cause of conflict and will balance these with resolutions that suggest ways of addressing them” (10). I believe that E.B. White, in his classic children’s books, comes closer than many children’s book writers in representing his disabled characters realistically, particularly when one considers the time period in which they were written. The characters enter the social milieu with great success. In *Stuart Little*, Stuart moves throughout his world with great aplomb, making friends and gaining employment as a substitute teacher. *The Trumpet of the Swan*, despite initially getting bogged down in language that strengthens the “tragedy of disability” mindset, shows its protagonist empowering himself to remove obstacles to having the life he wants. These novels are already in the canon and would provide a terrific occasion for discussion among their elementary readers. This focus would be a wonderful teaching opportunity.
AFTERWORD

In March of 2008, I was invited to read a portion of this thesis at a conference at UC Berkeley. The theme was “Canons of Children’s Literature.” I thought this conference would be a great venue to introduce the idea of viewing children’s literature in a non-conventional way (as a porthole for discussion of disability), and of how children’s perceptions of the disabled body may be shaped by their literature.

My reading was from Chapter One of this thesis – *Stuart Little*. The audience reaction to my reading was primarily positive. However, I got a surprise during the Q&A session afterwards. A woman stood up and asked me, “Stuart is of small size, true. Accommodations are made for him. But couldn’t you just interpret this book as a message of inclusiveness for children? After all, children are little and use little furniture. Maybe this book is just about treating little children with respect.” I answered the questioner somewhat superficially, noting that there were some similarities between Stuart and small children. But she pursued the point, and I realized there was an undercurrent to her question that I had missed. She reiterated, “Yes, but I really think this is just a book about respecting children,” and I realized we were at an impasse. I countered with, “Remember, Stuart Little is almost fully grown when he goes out into the world. And, in contrast to children, he is never going to get any larger. His issues with
size and access will be with him throughout his life.” My questioner was not
satisfied.

I was surprised at the questioner’s refusal to see *Stuart Little* as a text
about disability. I made allowances for the fact that she had just heard the paper
for the first time when she asked her questions, but I also noted that no other
readers at the conference received any challenging questions. Was there a larger
message here about resistance to discussing disability openly, or even seeing
disability as an important, vital topic in our culture?

I wondered afterwards: Who was I speaking for (and to) at the conference?
Was my audience there, or somewhere else? Before I read my paper, I had had a
long discussion with two of the participants about their new hearing aids, their
adjustment problems, and places they now avoided because they could not hear
well. Perhaps because my peer group is over forty, I take part in these discussions
more often. But I did wonder: Did my questioner see the world as “perfect”
versus “imperfect”? Did she see the danger of internalizing that thinking, and see
the disabled as invisible? And how many people in the audience identify with
Stuart, even if they did not choose to “out” themselves? These are questions that
are important to address, even if the answers are not simple.
Works Cited


