

## **Disability and why children need to read about it**

One of the most important reasons to keep *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck on the English GCSE syllabus is because it is one of the few books with a central character who has what would now be described as a learning disability. Lennie Small is a powerful figure because he is a complex man who makes things happen and gives the reader some insight into his particular perspective on the world. There are plenty of other American classic books that we could use to teach about disability, one of the best is perhaps *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (another one that is potentially doomed by Gove) where the mysterious social misfit Boo Radley proves himself to be central to the story, despite his inability to communicate in a conventional way. He is powerful because of his perceived difference. This novel also includes two deaf sisters: Misses Tutti and Frutti Barber, the former who lives in a world of silence whilst the other uses an ear trumpet. Another example is *This Heart is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers with a beautifully drawn complex central character, John Singer who is deaf and has a profound effect on all those who confide in him.

There are of course a few other memorable characters that appear in the 'English' literature canon so favoured by Michael Gove. For instance Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens and Long John Silver in *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, but if they are the only characters that children ever encounter – the well-worn and unhelpful negative stereotypes that traditionally associate disability with feelings of pity and/ tragedy or association with evil are in danger of being reinforced.

But surely all these literary characters are located in a time when attitudes to people who looked and behaved differently were pretty intolerant. Does it make any difference when contemporary children read about them in terms of shaping their attitudes? After all- we are told that we are living in a post Paralympic society where tolerance reigns and the rights of people with disabilities are championed. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Fuelled by the rhetoric of the current government's austerity campaign: stigma, harassment and hate crime against people with disabilities is an on-going scandal. Press portrayal continues to be unhelpful in this respect:

<http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/sites/default/files/pdf/disabilitypresscoverage.pdf>

Literature can play a powerful part in providing a more varied and affirmative representation, particularly if these are endorsed through the curriculum. There are now more recently published Young Adult novels which include positive portrayals of people with disabilities that could be used in schools and beyond. For instance *Wonder* by R.J.Palacio

tells the story about a ten year old boy born with a severe cranial deformity who enjoys school, fights against hatred and prejudice and becomes an important member of his community. *She is not invisible* by Marcus Sedgwick is about an intrepid female sixteen year old detective who travels with her younger brother to America to find her missing father. Despite being 'about' a blind girl, it is certainly not a book about being blind, yet it manages to cleverly convey a wealth of information about being visually impaired. It works because it feels authentic, largely because the writer worked closely with the RNIB and also consulted regularly with visually impaired students at the New College, Worcester. The recent Costa Book Award winner: *The Shock of the Fall* by Nathan Filer includes the main protagonist who lives independently with Schizophrenia and another character with severe physical disabilities who is cared for by her teenage son.

This is not just about looking at the content of books for children of secondary school age. There are now many examples published for younger children that are well written stories with strongly drawn characters, who have a disability. One example is: *Happy Butterfly* by Pippa Goodhart, illustrated by Lauren Tobia. This is a picture book about an exciting event in a little girl's life wants to join in with a Caribbean Carnival parade, and her grandmother makes her wings to turn her into a butterfly on a float. She happens to be a wheelchair user. In *Big Ben* by Rachel Anderson, illustrated by Jane Ray, the narrator's brother has Down Syndrome and the artwork and text come together to create a likeable and realistic character. The images of Ben indicate physical characteristics of Down Syndrome and this is reinforced by behavioural traits described in the story, but it is done with subtlety and sensitivity, to avoid resulting in a caricature (book review adapted from Alex Strick's excellent blog <http://www.booktrust.org.uk/books/children/bookmark/blog/156> )

The majority of literature for adults and children portrays able bodied characters. What children read from the earliest age could redress the balance if we believe that experience of literature is transformational. Barry Troyna (1951-1996) was an example of an educational sociologist and activist who was committed to achieving social justice in schools. Although he was not writing directly about disability, his work in the field of race and racism was seminal; especially in the way he argued that all those working in education have a human and professional responsibility to challenge racist vocabulary and social practices. Part of this involves critically examining how a negative dominant discourse may be transmitted and perpetuated through curriculum resources, including the kind of books provided (or not).

The way in which disability is defined, described and accommodated or, alternatively ignored and made invisible, depends to some degree on the knowledge, skills and awareness of the

people who work with children. It also relies on whether the resources they have to work with are powerful enough to carry these complex and subtle messages about the inclusion or exclusion of people with disabilities.

However, despite the need for these books to be made available and used with children of all ages in all schools and other educational settings, it is still difficult to find a good range in mainstream bookshops. Thankfully there are campaigning organisations devoted to make them known more widely, for example: <http://www.inclusiveminds.com/> and <http://www.letterboxlibrary.com/> . The educational charity Booktrust also provides specialist lists and reviews for books or advice regarding disability and is aimed at children, young people, parents, teachers and aspiring writers and illustrators:

<http://www.booktrust.org.uk/books/children/bookmark/>

These are books that should be in every school because they make a difference to how readers see the world. Indeed, the omission of characters with disabilities in the range of books that are given value and status sends a powerful message. Bob Dixon (1978:xv) wrote about this a long time ago 'Anyone interested in how ideas - political ideas in the broadest sense - are fostered and grow up in a society cannot afford to neglect what children read'. So, when politicians like Gove try to directly influence the content of the literature that children experience in the curriculum, we should be very concerned.