

**A Transition to Crip Lit: A Plea for Disability Literature to be Included as Compulsory
Reading for Secondary and Tertiary Students**

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Abstract

This is a part-personal, part-academic piece of writing intended to explain to the uninitiated why educators must start to include fiction with a prominent disability connection, in particular in the form of plays, novels, short stories and even poetry, in syllabi. I write this from the perspective of someone who self-identifies as queer, quadriplegic, anxious and depressed. I also write this from the perspective of someone who has cis privilege and white privilege. These perspectives cannot be separated from the research nor should they be.¹ This essay details what kinds of texts one might teach and why. A hypothetical reading list for a crip lit subject, or simply a place from which people can start to learn a part of my history, present and future.

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I went to a somewhat progressive but still mainstream public school for most of my education, and then because I have always been a show-off, decided I would try my luck at MacRobertson Girls High School, Melbourne, where entry is by exam, followed by interview. This prepared me for the present job market and a career in the arts by teaching me how to “fake it” and beg people for money. I also knew I was attracted to multiple genders since the age of about thirteen. Whilst I wouldn’t trade my mainstream school and my fancy Melbourne Uni bachelor degree for anything, there were and still are gaps. Even in Australia “the lucky country.” At my so-called progressive school there was no uniform (pause for

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shock and awe). I was possibly one of a handful of “integration students.” In laymen’s terms that means students that need some kind of assistance from a non-disabled person in order to be in a mainstream school rather than in specialist education, which in the words of Stella Young is “code for shit.”² In my year level there was me and one other girl who was somewhat visibly disabled. And like a good teen trying to be the fittest in a Darwinian society I traded homophobic and possibly other hurtful language with students my age and hung out with the Christian kids because it was better to have a group of non-friends around you than no friends at all. At this same progressive school, in subjects such as English, lit, drama, theatre studies and media, diversity meant that we did one book with a First Nations character clearly written by a white person, and an apparently less than satisfactory rendition of *To Kill A Mockingbird* (*A Lesson Before Dying*),³ and a teacher showed us some anime because she had been to that exotic place called Japan. There were no kids at the school who looked like me. No one I ever spoke to said they were into girls, and I was convinced I was the only one who had to see the school counsellor.

I was lucky that someone decided that I should do work experience at a disability organisation which gave me the community I didn’t know I needed. I also got to be part of a few iterations of Quippings: a multidisciplinary arts group that turned more towards spoken word/poetry in my last performance with them, who explicitly commissioned artistic work by people who identify as both queer and disabled.⁴ Here I could explore my queer self without being the only crip in the village. This is not to say that I don’t sometimes enjoy this position. This essay is in itself me saying look how superior I am to all you non-disabled folk. Look how much I know and how I’m going to teach you. But there are days when being the only

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obviously disabled person just feels like you are being stared at because you have three heads.

At uni the story was much the same although a little better. You could choose to do a women's lit subject or a subject about the literature of the slavery period in America. It is here that I sincerely apologise to all my hardworking lecturers and tutors because what I remember from three years of undergraduate lit classes was Emily Dickinson week (a poet who may or may not have been neurodivergent and/or queer), Sylvia Plath who set the stereotype of the depressed poet, and one single lecture about Back to Back Theatre.⁵ She nods to Eddie Paterson and Kath Duncan who agreed to collaborate with Arts Access Victoria on "The Last Avant-Garde," an academic project documenting contemporary disability performance.⁶ But the key word here is choose. I could have chosen not to study black American history, or feminist history, and instead decided to spend my career reading and writing fairytales. A possibility still open as one of my community's founding stories is that of the changeling child. In medieval European speak, a fairy child who was swapped with a human one. There are of course variations of this story but the perfect human baby is taken away to fairyland and the deformed fairy child is placed in the distressed arms of its parents, chaos ensuing.⁷ So one might begin here, if creating an entire disability literature subject. Or one might go further back in time to Tiresias, the blind prophet from ancient Greece. The man who cannot literally see, but who can see forward into the future, back in time and read people's real intentions. It is Tiresias' fault that we have so many misconceptions about the experience of being blind today.⁸ And so many bad blind fictional characters. This narrative of compensating for what is supposedly lacking in the body or mind appears with other disabilities as well, but Tiresias and Daredevil⁹ are the most famous.

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The compensation story is one of the harmful things that the disability community regularly faces.

But if my sob story about the struggles of intersectional identities doesn't interest you that's okay. Perhaps this will? One in four people experience some kind of psychosocial impairment throughout their lifetime (anxiety, depression, schizoaffective disorders, disassociative identity disorder), and one in five people will experience disability, either psychosocial or physical, at some point during their life; for many this impairment is unrelated to the process of aging.¹⁰ What do all my fancy big words mean? An artist who I have known for a long time wisely told me that the disability community is the largest minority in Australia. This may not be true but it is an accessible way to think about the importance of meeting these people, real or imaginary. It is worth bearing in mind here that post-traumatic stress disorder also comes under the large disability umbrella, so anyone with an experience of war, persecution, or our now current climate change refugees, will most likely be welcome in the disability community.¹¹ Here, I introduce "Persepolis," a semi-autobiographical graphic novel about an Iranian girl's experiences of forced migration.¹² Or to put it in Jess' words, non-disabled people don't tend to cry and struggle with life that much.

And so all our stories must be introduced in particular to the secondary school classroom or the lit major at university for those of us deemed worthy enough to get a tertiary education. The statistics tell us that it is likely that anyone reading this article, either is disabled or, if they are yet to be initiated, will soon have a friend, family member, partner or dare I hope, colleague who falls under this giant warm, fuzzy UN defined umbrella. Consider this a guide to prepare you for your first encounter so you don't look like a knob. And yes, I

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am still working on good words to insult people that don't have a disability connection. Yet I use the words cunt and cripple now without shame. In part thanks to someone I used to know who had the former word written in glittery pink letters as a fridge magnet. Speaking of offensive words, my band does a cover of "Spasticus Autisticus" by disabled punk singer/band Ian Dury and the Blockheads. We perform it because it is a critical part of disability arts history and perhaps to reclaim the S word for the next generation in what Dury describes as the "tribe of the disabled, which knows no race or creed... rich or poor." And yes, this is mostly an essay about books but I couldn't not include one of my famous ancestors.¹³

What else could we expect from the syllabus? It will be important to have a mixture of texts (and I say here controversially) written by disabled and non-disabled people. This is in part a reflection of the fact that our community is still often denied the education and/or employment opportunities that lead to what many define as a successful career in the arts. Or our alternative means of communication and expression are deemed inferior by the largely non-disabled elite. And so, there are few of us on stages and screens although it is improving. The other reason for this is that some of the best disabled characters which have inspired my work the most have been written by someone with no lived experience. Shakespeare's "Richard III"¹⁴ is one example of a text that must be heard even if only performed on stages in the future by actors with a physical impairment. Jeffery Deaver's 1997 crime novel, *The Bone Collector* is another that has had a huge impact on me as a writer.¹⁵

Next one would have to include a mixture of fiction and biography. This is because in many places around the world and throughout history, marginalised groups have been locked out of creative fiction especially in the traditional Western sense of the word. By contrast,

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people with disabilities have been able to write their own life stories or have someone write about their life with relatively more ease, especially in the last few decades in Australia.

These biographies, whilst not all of them are what I would call brilliant writing, have served to strengthen the disability community as a whole and give support to young people with disabilities finding their place in the world. Crucial texts like Helen Keller's autobiography¹⁶ and *Annie's Coming Out*¹⁷ have been key components of the Australian disability rights movement in conjunction with other more traditional forms of activism. These texts have also helped to bridge the divide between those who do and do not experience disability more broadly.

There would have to be a range of texts that represent as many different experiences of disability as possible, including those who sit both in and out of the community. In this last category I am thinking of, for example, texts involving writers or characters who are D/deaf. Here one might ask a deaf academic to present the basics of Auslan (some people who medically can't hear identify as a language minority rather than as part of the disability community). One might at this point do a comparison between Nina Raine's play *Tribes*¹⁸ (written by a hearing person) and Asphyxia's graphic novel *Future Girl*.¹⁹ As a self-described crazy person I would be thrilled to see disability literature tackle any number of authors from the past whose disabilities are speculated but which may never be proven. This would tie in seamlessly with a discussion of forced psychiatric admissions of people, particularly women who were behaving not as expected by their societies, and the related recent scholarship and activism that encompasses mad pride. I mention here Emily Dickinson who may or may not have been neurodiverse in some way, but there are many other similar creatives. Whilst I cringe at diagnosing disability onto authors many years after their death with little evidence

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other than the fact that they were odd, a friend pointed out to me recently that some writing, when you read it you cannot help but notice a brain that perceives the world differently to most people.

Finally, after travelling through time and space, across genres, forms and experiences, I would call in a guest lecturer from the media and communications department to do some in depth work on the ways that social media and blogging have become indispensable for the disability community. Although we should still be working to make our spaces more physically accessible and socially welcoming, the fact remains that there will always be people whose disabilities or other realities (parenting for example) mean that they will not be able to leave the house. Whilst many people are quick to malign social media, Naomi Chainee points out that social media and blogging allowed many people with disabilities for the first time a means of expression and connection with the wider world that they had never experienced before.²⁰ Any course therefore which seeks to unpack a connection between artistic output and disability studies must continue to move with technology not behind it, as people with disabilities will be those most reliant on any new developments. Here I do some self-promotion by saying that part of my goal as an artist is to create, for example, a play with many traditional components but which can be produced or reproduced online and in print. This approach to one text being available in multiple formats is most obvious in the music and film industries but could be applied to any artistic project if we as an industry are afforded the time, money and space to stretch the boundaries of what is currently possible.

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