Disability Studies Reads the Romance

Sexuality, Prejudice, and the Happily-Ever-After in the Work of Mary Balogh[1]

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Cultural disability studies scholars have repeatedly criticised academics in the humanities for perpetuating a "critical avoidance" (Bolt 287) of disability and disability issues. Yet cultural disability studies scholars themselves have been reluctant to engage with certain types of cultural production, and romance novels are a prime example of this. As the most popular of the popular genres,[2] romance novels are an obvious site of investigation for a field concerned with the effects representations of disability have upon the world. Though recent articles by Kathleen Miller, Emily M. Baldys and Sandra Schwab indicate the productive potential of a dialogue between disability studies and popular romance studies,[3] the critical conversation about disability in romance novels has only just begun.[4] Focusing on selected novels by Mary Balogh, a bestselling author of historical romance, I argue that romances with disabled protagonists offer significant opportunities to challenge negative stereotypes around

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2 | Statistics from Romance Writers of America indicate an estimated total sales value for romance of $1.08 billion in 2013 ("Romance Industry Statistics" n. pag.).

3 | Miller uses feminist and disability scholarship to analyse vampire romances by Tanya Huff and Charlaine Harris. Baldys analyses five novels with cognitively disabled protagonists, arguing that these novels "bring both compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness to bear on disabled sexuality" (128). Schwab analyses visual impairment and the loss of sight in two historical romances by Teresa Medeiros.

4 | Bly states that criticism of popular romance as a whole is still "in its infancy" (n. pag.). For a detailed discussion of popular romance scholarship, see Selinger and Frantz.

disability. The frequent use of disabled characters in Balogh's novels, and the way in which those characters are presented, positions all disabled characters as potential romantic actants, and encourages readers to critically reflect upon how they conceptualise disability and the values they attach to it.

Popular Romance

Though the romance novel has been variously defined,[5] in this piece I adopt the definition used by Romance Writers of America, under which every romance novel has two vital elements:

> "A Central Love Story: The main plot centers around individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work. A writer can include as many subplots as he/she wants as long as the love story is the main focus of the novel. An Emotionally-Satisfying and Optimistic Ending: In a romance, the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love." ("About the Romance Genre" n. pag.)

Romance novels come in many different varieties,[6] but these two elements are essential. While there are numerous other conventions of the popular romance novel whose analysis rewards a disability-informed approach – for example, the fact that romance heroes and heroines typically have "not merely 'normal' bodies, but perfect bodies" (Schwab 287) – I focus on these two essential elements. As Pamela Regis notes, critics "attack the romance novel for its happy ending in marriage" (7). Frequently, the fact that all romances follow the same basic plot pattern has been the cause of critical dismissal – either as part of a rejection of the genre as formulaic or on ideological grounds. However, the focus on the developing relationship between the heroine and hero, and the requirement for a happily-ever-after ending ("HEA" in romance parlance) in which those characters are united, means that romance novels featuring disabled characters are of particular interest when examined from a disability studies perspective.

This can be seen in the work of Mary Balogh, a Welsh-born author of over 70 historical romance novels. Mindful of cautions against romance scholarship

5 | Regis traces a long historical lineage for the romance novel by defining it broadly as "a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines" (19) and identifying eight essential narrative elements. In this piece I focus on contemporary popular romance novels rather than 'romance' in a broader sense.

6 | For explanation of subgenres and formats, see Romance Writers of America, "Romance Subgenres."

that makes sweeping generalisations based on a small number of texts,[7] I do not claim the selected novels by Balogh I analyse here are representative of *all* popular romance novels (or even all works by Balogh). Rather, this analysis of her work is intended to suggest some of the possibilities that might be opened up for cultural disability studies, and for popular romance studies, by bringing the two fields together. Within Balogh's prolific output, I focus on two sets of Regency-era[8] novels: the six books in the *Slightly* series (published 2003-04), and the *Simply* quartet (2005-2008). Disabled characters appear frequently in these books. *Simply Love* (2006) features a disabled hero, Sydnam Butler, who is an amputee with one eye and significant facial scarring. Secondary characters with impairments abound, such as Prudence Moore, who is cognitively disabled (*Slightly Scandalous*, 2003, and other novels) and one-eyed Sergeant Strickland in *Slightly Sinful* (2004). In addition to the main characters discussed below, there are constant glimpses of other disabled people in the society depicted in these novels, from the amputee soldiers nursed by the heroine in *Slightly Tempted* (2004), to the hero's mobility-impaired grandmother in *Slightly Wicked* (2003). Interconnections between the novels in each series, between the two series, and with other works by Balogh, allow the reader a longer-term picture of the characters' lives, including an indication of what happens after the HEA.

Sexuality and Community

Simply Love begins with the hero, Sydnam Butler, living in a state of relative isolation. Despite his aristocratic background, he has withdrawn from society to live a "quiet, semireclusive life" (*Simply Love* 20) as the steward of a country estate after torture by enemy soldiers in the Peninsular Wars left him with significant facial scarring and nerve damage, and caused him to lose an eye and an arm. Despite "fulfilling work and several good friends," he admits that he is "essentially lonely" (99). As a consequence of what Carol Thomas terms "*the psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism*" (46), Sydnam has, to a degree, segregated himself from wider society.[9] On hearing that the owner of the estate

7 | Selinger and Frantz note that even in contemporary romance scholarship, critics "perpetuate a second tic of early scholarship: the impulse to frame their discussion in terms of the genre as a whole" even where only a small number of texts are actually considered (n. pag.). See also Regis (5-7).

8 | The Regency is the period from 1811 to 1820, in which the future King George IV ruled the United Kingdom as Prince Regent. It is a popular setting for romance novels.

9 | Thomas defines the psycho-emotional aspects of disability as "social barriers which erect 'restrictions' within ourselves, and thus place limits on our psycho-emotional well-being: for example, feeling 'hurt' by the reactions and behaviours of those around

will be visiting for a month with a large party of family and friends, Sydnam plans to move out of the main house where he normally lives, into a cottage nearby, and "stay out of the way as much as he was able to" (*Simply Love* 21) – despite several of his old friends being among the party. The rest of the novel traces Sydnam's journey from a state of loneliness and isolation to being part of a fulfilling romantic relationship, a family unit, and a wider community.

Having avoided women since he was tortured, Sydnam is resigned to his status as a man who has "learned to live alone. [...] Without a woman for his bed or his heart" (36). He believes that women are repulsed by him – a belief that is given some justification when the heroine, Anne, encountering him unexpectedly, is so shocked by his appearance that she actually runs away. Despite this inauspicious start, the two develop a relationship, but part after their first sexual encounter is a failure. He believes her physical unresponsiveness is due to repulsion at his appearance, while she is struggling with the traumatic aftereffects of being raped a decade earlier. The pregnancy that results from their liaison, however, forces them to marry, but with each believing that they are, in some sense, unworthy of the other. As they support each other in recovering a sense of self-worth, the two develop a relationship that is both loving and sexually fulfilling.

In the context of a contemporary culture in which there is "a pervasive cultural de-eroticization of people with disabilities" (Mollow and McRuer 4), the emphasis placed on the development of a sexually satisfying relationship is significant. Anna Mollow and Robert McRuer note the "segregation" of "sex and disability [...] in dominant cultural representations" (2). Depicting disabled heroes and heroines in satisfying sexual relationships and as erotic agents, as Balogh does, challenges this segregation. The status of the romance genre as a mass-market popular form, and the importance of fulfilling sexual relationships as an element of the HEA means that romances featuring disabled heroes or heroines are uniquely positioned to challenge public perceptions of disabled people as asexual.[10] More broadly, the depiction of disabled characters

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us, being made to feel worthless, of lesser value, unattractive, hopeless, stressed, or insecure" (47).

10 | The picture becomes less clear when another dominant stereotype, disabled people as sexually abnormal, is considered. Mollow and McRuer pose the questions: "But what if disability were sexy? And what if disabled people were understood to be both subjects and objects of a multiplicity of erotic desires and practices?" (1). While the romances I discuss here affirm the possibility of disability as sexy, they, like virtually all mainstream romance novels, offer their disabled characters access only to a narrow version of sexuality (heterosexual, monogamous, vanilla) rather than a "multiplicity of erotic desires and practices." See Kaplan and Baldys for further discussion of heteronormativity in romance novels.

achieving the HEA is significant in a society still dominated by tragedy-model perspectives and thus ambivalent about whether disabled people are worthy or desiring of love: Sara Hosey notes "the enduring stereotype that disabled women [...] are incapable of initiating or maintaining mutually fulfilling romantic relationships" (40), while Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer (citing Harlan Hahn) write that in television portrayals of disabled characters, "the 'good parts' of ordinary lives – love, romance and sex – are largely absent or not stressed" (94). In romance novels, these 'good parts' of life, and how the protagonists secure them, are the main business of the narrative. Romance novels with disabled heroes or heroines require the reader to enter into an imaginative engagement with a world where disabled people love and are loved – happily ever after.

Simply Love depicts Sydnam's incorporation into a romantic couple, but also emphasises his incorporation into a family as well. Before the war his dreams included "a home of my own and a wife and children" (*Simply Love* 157). His desire to be a father is emphasised throughout the novel; he thinks enviously of a friend "[a]nd there was a baby in Bewcastle's nursery" (64). At the same time, though, he fears that children will recoil from him because of his appearance: "He would try at least to remain out of sight of the children. He did not want to frighten them. The worst feeling in the world was to see fear, revulsion, horror, and panic on the faces of children and to know that it was his own appearance that had caused it" (21). With one child describing Sydnam as "the monster" (86), his fears are not unfounded. Once engaged to Anne, Sydnam worries that David, her son, will not be able to love him: "And who could blame him if he did not? What child would choose a one-eyed, one-armed father whom most children and even some adults feared as a monster?" (231). However, drawn together by a shared love of painting, Sydnam and David develop a close relationship. Anne thinks, "[t]hey were a family" after Sydnam refers to David as "my boy" (304). Sydnam's status as father is cemented on the novel's final page by David calling him "Papa" for the first time, as the three of them arrive at their new family home together. Accepted as a father by David and married to the mother of his unborn child, Sydnam is at the heart of a new family unit.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's comment that "sexuality and community" are "two narrative currents which are seldom included in the usual stories we tell about disability" ("Shape" 114) suggests a link between sexuality and community that is borne out in *Simply Love*. Sydnam's incorporation into a romantic relationship and a family are connected, but so too is his integration into a wider social community. Anne and Sydnam are thrown together by the matchmaking efforts of various members of the house party. On their wedding day, the hasty nature of their wedding means that none of Sydnam's family and friends are present. Although overjoyed to be marrying Anne, Sydnam remembers his brother's wedding with some envy, where the couple were "surrounded by their families and friends, the church packed with people"

(*Simply Love* 237). On learning of their marriage, though, their friends and families organise a surprise celebration. This event serves not only as celebration of their marriage but as affirmation that they have been fully accepted into a wider social community. In a recent article, Hosey suggests that the authors she discusses make the significant move of "present[ing] stories about disability that situate characters in communities and traditions," rather than in isolation (48). Balogh's novel goes further than the mainstream narratives Hosey analyses, emphasising multiple levels of union or belonging: romantic couple, family, wider community. While not all romance novels explicitly position their protagonists becoming part of family and community units, the movement towards union inherent to the romance plot always entails the rejection of segregation and isolation.

On the Margins

My discussion so far has focused on romance novels featuring disabled heroes or heroines, arguing that novels which depict disabled characters as romance protagonists offer significant potentials for challenging a range of negative stereotypes. Two questions follow: Firstly, how often do disabled characters feature in romance novels, and what about works where disabled characters appear in secondary roles? Schwab writes that in romance novels the hero "is often physically impaired," while "[i]mpaired heroines tend to be much rarer" (276). Baldys claims a "recent proliferation of disabled characters in popular romance novels" (125). However, in the absence of large scale quantitative studies of the genre it is infeasible to make firm statements about the frequency with which disabled characters appear in the genre.[11] I therefore focus on the potentials the depiction of disabled characters in the genre offers. These potentials are relatively clear-cut when disabled characters appear in the role of hero or heroine, but less so where disabled characters appear in secondary roles.

Whilst *Simply Love* shows disabled characters moving from a state of isolation to one of community, *Slightly Married* begins with a community where disabled people are valued and included. Heroine Eve's fortune supports a host

11 | Baldys cites the list of 200+ novels featuring characters with disabilities on the *All About Romance* website as evidence ("Disabilities in Romance"). However, I claim that (a) this is not a particularly large number in the larger context of the genre, and (b) the function of the "Special Title Listings" on this site (of which the "Disabilities in Romance" list is one) is to guide readers to niche categories within the romance genre – those which the reader is unlikely to encounter through casual browsing. Other listings in the same section include twin romances, sports romances, and romances involving courtroom dramas.

of people unwanted by or excluded from society. Her two foster children are orphans, and she provides for "Aunt Mari," a distant relative lamed by years of mine work. Her staff includes Charlie, a cognitively disabled odd-job man unwanted elsewhere after the death of his father, and Ned, an amputee war veteran. Her housekeeper is an ex-convict, and the governess to her foster children is an unmarried mother. Even Eve's dog is the victim of past abuse and has lost an eye and a leg. With the death of her brother, Eve is disinherited and the estate and income that supports the household is lost. It is largely to save the home and livelihood of these others that Eve enters into a marriage of convenience with the hero, Aidan, since marriage will allow her to keep her home and income, and therefore keep the community intact.

Aidan is initially dismissive of the community Eve has created. He accuses her of having a "bleeding heart" and filling "her home and neighbourhood with lame ducks" (*Slightly Married* 59). His primary motive in marrying Eve is the gallant one of preventing her from losing her home, and his intention that the marriage be in name only. However, Aidan is gradually drawn in to Eve's life, and ultimately has a change of heart about the community Eve has created: "I have sometimes spoken with irritation and even contempt of your lame ducks. I am sorry about that. I honor your generosity and your love for all creatures, no matter their looks or their station in life or their history" (303). This declaration is the final piece of evidence that Aidan is worthy of Eve's love. The novel ends with Aidan leaving the army to assist Eve's steward in setting up and running a farming project that will provide work for disabled, destitute ex-soldiers. The community depicted at the start of the novel is not only secured but expanded.

While *Slightly Married* depicts disabled characters as valued parts of a community, the novel bears out Garland-Thomson's assertion that "[d]isabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction" (*Extraordinary* 9), with the individual disabled characters remaining relatively peripheral. Lennard J. Davis notes that where disabled characters appear in literature "the disabled character is never of importance to himself or herself. Rather, the character is placed in the narrative 'for' the nondisabled characters – to help them develop sympathy, empathy, or as a counterbalance to some issue in the life of the 'normal' character" ("Crips" 45). In *Slightly Married* the disabled characters' collective function is to advance the story of the (able-bodied) heroine and hero; they exist primarily as a means of illustrating the heroine's kind and generous nature and providing impetus for her to marry. Later, Aidan's change of heart regarding Eve's 'lame ducks' is evidence that he is worthy of her. In most analyses, the next step would be to move from the statement that these characters are on the margins of the narrative to a claim that they are marginalised – as disabled people have so long been marginalised in a prejudiced society. However, the particular context in which these representations appear problematises this logical leap. In popular romance, where "the love story is the main focus of the

novel" (Romance Writers of America, "About" n. pag.), the only two characters that are essential to the narrative are the hero and heroine. *All* other characters are by definition peripheral or marginal. While some romance novels offer a range of fleshed-out secondary characters, even in these works the majority of the textual space is occupied by the central couple, and the secondary characters function in relation to them.[12] While romance novels can (and do) marginalise disabled characters on ideological grounds, it is important to note that there may be structural factors at work as well. Genre context is thus a crucial factor in analysing representations of disability.

Yardstick Roles

One tool for analysing the depiction of disabled secondary characters in romance is David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's notion of disability as "narrative prosthesis." Rather than attempt to engage with the full complexity of narrative prosthesis in the limited space available here,[13] I focus on a single aspect of disability representation that falls within that rubric, adapting Patricia M. Puccinelli's work on "retarded characters" in fiction. Puccinelli defines the "yardstick quality" as "the capacity to act as or provide a measure against which other characters in the narrative are assessed. From this measurement the reader makes judgements about the other characters" (15). Therefore: "The other character's responses to the retarded character reveals much about his or her own true nature. For example, if a character responds to a retarded

12 | Advice from Mills & Boon on "How to Write the Perfect Romance" makes this explicit: "I *don't like* secondary characters – use with caution! You're writing a romance, readers are interested in your hero and heroine so keep the focus on them" (n. pag.; emphasis in original). Whilst Mills & Boon category romances have more restricted word limits (typically 50,000-75,000 words) than other types of romance novel, the focus on the central couple holds more generally.

13 | Narrative prosthesis "enables a contrast between [...] mainstream discourses that would disguise or obliterate the evidence of physical and cognitive differences, and literary efforts that expose prosthesis as an artificial, and thus, resignifiable, relation" (Mitchell and Snyder 9). Although the term 'mainstream discourses' is never defined, it seems likely that genre fiction would fall into this category. Further, genre fiction is marginalised in *Narrative Prosthesis*: there is a lack of engagement with genre texts, and the ways in which some types of genre fiction might complicate their assertions about the representation of disability in literature are never acknowledged. Finally, although it is often invoked in a simplistic way, the notion of narrative prosthesis as outlined by Mitchell and Snyder is both complex and multifaceted and to engage with it meaningfully requires an amount of space not available here.

character with kindness and patience (even if the responding character appears villainous in other situations), the reader is likely to attribute at least some positive qualities to the non-retarded character" (ibid.).

As the terminology suggests, Puccinelli's engagement with a disability studies perspective is minimal, and consequently her work has been little used within cultural disability studies. Though aspects of her work are problematic, the yardstick concept is particularly useful when considering romance novels. Developing empathy for the heroine and/or hero is vital in romance, and yardstick characters are frequently deployed in romance novels to achieve this, as highlighted by Janice A. Radway. Radway had her participants identify "ideal romances," and found that in these works, the heroine "is always portrayed as unusually compassionate, kind, and understanding. Typically, some minor disaster occurs in the early stages of the story that proves the perfect occasion for her to display her extraordinary capacity for empathetic nurturance and tender care" (127). Frequently it is the deployment of a yardstick character that allows the heroine to demonstrate this capacity for 'tender care.' In Balogh's novels, all of the following function as yardsticks at various points: children, orphans, servants, animals, older people, people with impairments, the dead, prostitutes, and those marginalised by their class position or financial status.

In *Simply Perfect*, one of the key secondary characters is the hero's eleven year old daughter Lizzie, who has been blind since birth. Her father Joseph is searching for a way to educate and care for her after the death of her mother, and suspects that the boarding school run by Claudia, the heroine, may offer the solution. Unsure if Lizzie is ready to attend school, Claudia proposes a trial where Lizzie will join a group of charity girls – girls from impoverished backgrounds who attend the school for free – whom she is taking to the house of an acquaintance for the summer. The scheme allows Joseph, visiting family nearby, to have some contact with his daughter, although it requires the pretense that they are unrelated. Although he loves Lizzie deeply, her illegitimacy means that Joseph is unable to publicly acknowledge her, and his family is unaware she exists.

Lizzie joins the group of girls, and her identity remains hidden, despite frequent contact with her father. Whilst most characters accept Lizzie, one person's attitude stands out in sharp contrast: Portia Hunt, the appropriate bride selected for Joseph by his parents, and to whom he becomes engaged during the novel. When Joseph, Portia and others see Lizzie playing with the other girls, Portia is the only one to comment negatively: "Is that the *blind* girl I have heard about? … She is spoiling the dance for the others. And she is making a spectacle of herself, poor girl" (*Simply Perfect* 211). Portia also comments within Lizzie's hearing that Lizzie is a clumsy dancer (224). Yet another character offers a very different view of the same scene: "They were a delight, were they not, Joseph, all dancing about the maypole? And that little blind girl was quite

undaunted by her affliction" (222). Portia's hostility to Lizzie is partly based upon her class background, but also specifically relates to her impairment. After Claudia and her pupils attend a local event to which they have been invited, Portia comments that it is disrespectful "to have brought *charity* pupils to mingle with such a gathering. [...] And a *blind* charity girl is the outside of enough" (251). Portia's attitude is in marked contrast to the other members of the aristocratic group, who are universally accepting of Lizzie. One comments that Lizzie "is a delightful child" who "has become everyone's pet" (232); she is "something of a favourite with the duchess and her other guests" (223). After Lizzie's true identity is revealed, the same group is surprisingly, and perhaps a little implausibly, sanguine: "I do believe most people are secretly charmed by the fact that she is his daughter. Everyone had fallen for her anyway" (257). The secret out, Joseph seizes the chance to have Lizzie live with him, but Portia rejects this idea absolutely, referring to Lizzie as "that dreadful creature" and "that dreadful blind child" (263, 280), and saying she will marry him only if she never sees Lizzie or hears her name again. Their broken engagement clears the way for Claudia and Joseph to be united.

Lizzie therefore acts as a yardstick character in the novel. The only characters who respond to Lizzie less than positively are those who function as barriers to the union of Claudia and Joseph, including Claudia's former lover, who wants to rekindle their romance, and Joseph's father and sister, who want him to marry Portia. The reader is invited to judge the characters in the text based on their reaction to Lizzie. Were this the full extent of her role in the text, we might read this as a representation which reinforces the marginalisation of disabled people – the character placed in the narrative 'for' the non-disabled characters as described by Davis. However, this is not the case. Much attention is given to her character development, including a section where she is the viewpoint character (see *Simply Perfect* 235-240). Lizzie's presence undoubtedly serves the romance narrative, both in her role as yardstick and as justification for bringing the hero and heroine together across class boundaries. However, the romance narrative also serves Lizzie, whose life is transformed in the course of the novel. At the end of the novel she is starting a new life where she can live with her father all the time, and has a new stepmother whom she has already grown to love. Lizzie's role suggests, then, that a disabled character can function as a yardstick without necessarily being marginalised.[14]

14 | Lizzie's position not only as a disabled person but as a disabled child is also significant. Child characters are frequently deployed in romance novels in a yardstick role, or as a device to advance the plot in some other way (e.g. the heroine is employed as a governess for the hero's child). Characterisation of these characters is often minimal, to the extent that one romance website coined a specific term for this phenomenon:

In *Slightly Scandalous* (2003), another disabled female character problematises a straightforwardly negative interpretation of the yardstick role. Prudence Moore, who is cognitively disabled, is the hero's cousin. Initially Prudence appears to be in the novel to function as a yardstick for a number of the other characters, including the hero, the heroine, and the major villain of the piece, Prudence's own mother. The hero's evident love and regard for her, and the actions that he takes to protect Prudence and secure her happiness – he refuses to let her mother put her in an asylum, and liberates her from the nursery to which she is largely confined despite being eighteen – serves as evidence of the essential goodness of his nature. However, Prudence does not just disappear from the text after fulfilling the yardstick function; she remains one of the major secondary characters. By the end of the novel, with the hero's blessing and acknowledgement of her status as an adult able to make her own choices, Prudence chooses to leave her mother and marry the man she is in love with.

This in itself would be significant, but it is not the end of the story. Because of the way the novels are interlinked we learn more about Prudence's life. In *Simply Love* we learn that Prudence now has two sons, and the heroine of that novel envies her happiness. Two books later, in *Simply Perfect*, we get a further update: Claudia describes her as "the sweetest young woman imaginable. She married a fisherman and bore him sturdy sons and runs his home and is as happy as it is possible to be" (329-30). Prudence's story, then challenges particular negative stereotypes about disability. Like the disabled hero Sydnam Butler in *Simply Love*, she moves from a position of isolation (segregation within the family home, and the threat of institutionalisation) to being part of a couple, a family, and a wider community. As the wording of Claudia's comment highlights, Prudence has achieved her happily ever after. In finding an enduring love, and building a family and home upon it, her fate is indistinguishable from that of the non-disabled romance heroine.

Characters in Balogh's novels are part of the romance world in the obvious sense of featuring in a romance novel. However, these characters are also part of the romance world in the specific sense of being potential romantic actants – regardless of their disability status. Lizzie's father is concerned with finding "a husband who will be kind to her" in the future (*Simply Perfect* 117), rather than about whether she will or will not eventually marry. One of the key pleasures for readers of Balogh's novels is catching glimpses of characters whose love stories will be told in future novels, and being updated on the status of couples from earlier books (in *Simply Perfect*, for example, Sydnam and Anne from *Simply Love* appear as minor characters). In some cases, as with Prudence and with Sergeant Strickland in *Slightly Sinful*, these love stories are told in

"Plot Moppet: a small child who has no purpose or development except to drive the plot forward" (Wendell n. pag.).

secondary romance plots which run parallel to the central narratives. In other cases, the disabled characters are heroes or heroines of later novels: the "lame and pretty Lady Muir" (*Simply Perfect* 252), who appears occasionally in both series, is the heroine of *The Proposal* (2012). Balogh's work therefore not only features disabled heroes and heroines achieving the HEA, but also positions the secondary disabled characters as doing the same or likely to do the same.

Representations and their Effects

Balogh's novels, then, challenge particular negative stereotypes through their depictions of disabled characters achieving the HEA. More broadly, I suggest that romance novels featuring disabled heroes and heroines have significant potentials to do the same. Yet, as Mitchell and Snyder write, "The issue of representation and what it produces in readers is extremely complex" (41). Radway's early feminist work on popular romance reminds us that there may be a significant gap between what one person perceives as the ideological positioning of a particular text and what another actually takes away from reading it. In claiming Balogh's novels as challenging various negative stereotypes, I am not aiming to fix these novels as "positive" representations which should be placed on some hypothetical list of "acceptable" representations of disability (Mitchell and Snyder 42). Rather, I am arguing for a positive *interpretation* of these novels: one which sees them as being potentially useful in the struggle to break down social barriers.

In particular, I suggest that Balogh's novels encourage the reader to reflect upon how they conceptualise disability: by challenging particular negative stereotypes as noted above, but also through explicit discussion and exploration of what it means to be 'disabled.' Sergeant Strickland rejects the label of unfit implicit in his discharge from the army, identifying other venues where his changed physical abilities are irrelevant: "I can dress you and shave you and look after your clothes with one eye the same as two" (*Slightly Sinful* 113). Other characters note that definitions of normality are socially constructed: one character refers to Prudence as "a child who was not normal according to the definition of normality that society had concocted" (*Simply Love* 32). Characters' own ideas of disability change and develop – her contact with Lizzie leads Claudia to comment "I have just realized that *all* girls are different from the norm. In other words, the norm does not exist except in the minds of those who like tidy statistics" (*Simply Perfect* 114). Not only is what is "normal" constructed, contingent, and subject to change, but non-disabled people acknowledge the limitations of their understanding. The hero of *Slightly Scandalous* acknowledges that in viewing those with "physical and mental

abilities different from the norm" he and other able-bodied people are only able to "view them from our own limited perspective" (256).

Balogh's work also encourages a reflexive approach to disability through the depiction of disabled characters experiencing prejudice. Portia's reaction to Lizzie in *Simply Perfect* is one example, but a deeper engagement with this theme is seen in *Simply Love*. In this novel, Balogh offers an extended description of the first meeting between Anne and Sydnam. Each of them is walking alone, entertaining romantic fantasies about the other, but the mood is shattered when they get closer, and Anne sees him clearly for the first time:

> "[S]he stood transfixed again – but with horror this time. [...] He was a man with half a face, the extraordinarily beautiful left side all the more grotesque because there was no right side to balance it. He was beauty and beast all rolled into one. And all of a sudden his height and those powerful thighs and broad shoulders seemed menacing rather than enticing." (*Simply Love* 30)

Shocked, Anne runs away, and though she returns shortly after to apologise, she is too late and Sydnam is gone. Several pages are devoted to Anne's reflection upon her actions, and the guilt she feels leaves the reader in no doubt that her behaviour is unacceptable. She is "mortified" (31), and reflects "she had recoiled from him, run away in fright and revulsion. How had he felt?" (33). This question is answered a few pages later when the encounter is presented again from Sydnam's point of view, with his romantic daydreams abruptly shattered: "He gazed after her and was again Sydnam Butler, grotesquely ugly, with his right eye gone and the purple scars of old burns down the side of his face, paralyzing most of the nerves there, and all along his armless side to his knee" (35). Despite having "left self-pity behind long ago," "it would take him days to recover his equilibrium" (36).

Writing about film and television representations of disability, Paul Longmore identifies a recurring motif whereby disabled characters "spurn opportunities for romance because of a lack of self-acceptance," while the nondisabled characters "have no trouble finding the disabled persons attractive or falling in love with them, and have no difficulty in accepting them with their disabilities" (142). This type of representation, Longmore suggests, differs greatly from "the real-life experiences" of disabled people, who often find "even the most minor impairments result in romantic rejection" (142). Overall, such depictions "invert social reality and allow the nondisabled audience to disown its anxieties and prejudices about disabled people" (142). Rather than allowing the reader to disown their prejudices, *Simply Love*'s uncompromising depiction of disability-related prejudice brings these issues to the foreground, confronting the reader with what it might feel like to be on the receiving end.

Even after Anne apologies to Sydnam, and the two start afresh, their interactions remain strained. Anne's mind "chattered incessantly with questions she knew she could not ask" about how he acquired his injuries (*Simply Love* 58), and she is highly conscious of how she looks at him, "how difficult it was to look at him as if he were any normal man" (57). As with the earlier scene, the reader is presented with both viewpoints, but in this case the dual perspective is used to illustrate the difference Anne's efforts make: "She was looking directly into his face. Most people, he had observed, either did not look quite at him or else focused their eyes on his left ear or his left shoulder. With most people he felt the urge to turn his head slightly to the side so that they would not have to be repulsed quite so badly. He did not feel that urge with her" (68).

Rather than a facile depiction where "good" characters simply are not prejudiced, Balogh explores the causes and effects of disability-related prejudice, and shows the characters working to overcome them.

Conclusion

Simply Love, then, foregrounds the difficulties those with extraordinary bodies face in interactions with able-bodied others, and stresses the importance of attitudes and behaviours in creating an environment that is welcoming or hostile. In this novel as in others, Balogh's depiction of disabled characters encourages readers to reflect upon their own attitudes and beliefs with regards to disability. The rapid expansion of popular romance scholarship in recent years indicates how much romance novels have to offer to scholars in a whole range of fields. This analysis of selected works by Balogh illustrates some of the productive potentials of bringing together cultural disability studies and popular romance studies: a union that is surely to the benefit of both fields.

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Responses to Ria Cheyne

Martin Roussel

Literally and Literary Disabled Bodies

In my comment on Ria Cheyne's paper I would like to discuss the idea of *fiction* and its possibilities for dealing with disability. For this purpose, I will explore, as Cheyne summarizes her analysis of selected works by Mary Balogh, "productive potentials of bringing together cultural disability studies and popular romance studies: a union that is surely to the benefit of both fields" (214). However, my argument does not stress the applicability – or extension – of disability studies within the field of literary and cultural studies, but goes the other way around: How can we define the idea of 'disability' not only as a topic or motif in narrative discourses but in a more specific literary sense? How does literature contribute to the idea of something or someone being 'disabled?' What kinds of narratives structure our understanding of disability? And is there something that a literary perspective might add to our understanding of disability? I understand my remarks as generally in accordance with Cheyne's basic arguments about an evaluative criticism specifying the necessity for interpretation rather than simply depiction in the sense of retelling. Interpretation means taking a position. Yet, this kind of social responsibility should take into account the differences between a representation or fictional text and its depiction or interpretation. The question is: How can we morally judge fiction?

I will start addressing these issues by quoting a phrase Franz Kafka wrote between 1922 and 1924: "Once I broke my leg, it was the greatest experience of my life" (Kafka 548; translation by author).[15] Whether intentionally or not, Kafka did not finish these words with a full stop. It is not by chance that I quote this detached if not scattered sentence instead of commenting on a longer narrative structure or the whole of an œuvre. The statement lacks any context within Kafka's fragments. If we take this very brief but also highly emphasized

15 | Original quote: "Einmal brach ich mir das Bein, es war das schönste Erlebnis meines Lebens."

phrase by a first-person narrator as a miniature story about disability, this story tells us about the luck of dysfunction. The general function of the fragmentary sentence – to articulate a special relationship to dysfunction – is highlighted by the indifference Kafka demonstrates towards the question of whether he, or the narrator, broke his right or left leg, or both legs; it simply states that somebody broke "mein Bein [my leg]," which indicates not the function of one of his legs, but the function of 'leg' in general. How are we to understand Kafka's emphasis? Maybe he (or a she, or an it) was lucky to break a leg because having broken his/her leg he/she/it was unable to do whatever might have to be done if he/she/it had sound legs? One might also ask why we should necessarily think of a human being with two legs, one of them injured, and not of a horse or an elephant with four legs? Why should we recognize Kafka's, we might assume, temporary experience as a highly positive one if it means having to deal with an impairment, with dysfunction, and a lack of capacity to act the way one 'normally' acts?

Eventually, two different perspectives in reading this Kafka story might come to mind. From one angle, we might acknowledge numerous perspectives in reading the sentence. We would therefore reflect upon the representational meaning of the broken leg and the ways of understanding it as a comment on impairment and why this ailment might involve happiness. A second option is not at first hand concerned with the different readings of this partly delightful, partly peculiar story. Kafka's note ties us back to the question of the meaning of being disabled: Do we, in fact, know what it means to consider an impairment as 'good' or 'bad,' as 'positive' or 'negative?' Are we to consider impairment as lack of something – of health, of wholeness, of functionality? And how does this correspond to the use of the term 'disability' in the field of disability studies that refers to socially constructed barriers? At the very least, we might say that Kafka's fragment first selects the act of becoming impaired as its central theme and, secondly, emphasizes this incident as a most beautiful/joyful/satisfying one.[16] Are we to find in Kafka's phrase a certain kind of 'counter-narrative' to the way we think of 'disability' as being confronted with socially constructed barriers?

And, what I think is the most important question in this context, are we to consider a lack of something as 'wrong' in the sense that there should be something 'more? In this sense, what could it mean that Kafka's phrase goes the other way round? The sudden emergence of an impairment, which is literally, and also metaphorically, connected with his ability to stand on his own feet, becomes an experience of deep impact. Of course we know of Kafka as a major example of a 'loser son' struggling with his authoritative father. As Avital Ronell has recently shown in her book *Loser Sons*, Kafka, in his literary works,

16 | The German *schönstes Erlebnis* (most beautiful/joyful/satisfying experience) links to the traditional aesthetic discourse of the late 18th century.

puts fundamental mechanisms of authority on the table. The German term "schönstes Erlebnis" is difficult to accurately translate into English: It means "greatest experience," but also includes an aesthetic dimension like "most beautiful experience." Then, why could we speak of a disabling event as in itself being beautiful? What kind of beauty is thus revealed? In a sense, this could be the beauty of life, of emotional and physical presence.

According to my understanding of the history of disability studies, one of the concerns within this field has been to deconstruct the hierarchy between the non-impaired and the disabled body or to deconstruct our prior knowledge of the body (and the mind) as normally normalized phenomena, i.e. as phenomena that have become 'normal' in an unnoticed manner. If one must acknowledge normalizing procedures, one also must accept that there is not *yet* the 'normal.' Consequently, there may not exist anything like a normal body without the procedure of normalization. As early as 1989 in *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, Avital Ronell wrote about the non-existence – in a natural sense – of the perfect body. According to Ronell, humans have always tried to complete something – something that we, the humans, are – or to implement the idea of completing ourselves in the processes of learning, growing up, or aging. An effect of this has been that technology has always played the role of a supplementary factor. Ronell argues that the prosthesis as "godlike annexation to a certain extent enjoys the status of the fetish, covering a missing or inadequate body part, amplifying the potentiality of a constitutively fragile organ" (Ronell 88). Following Ronell and her reading of Sigmund Freud's *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* [*Civilization and Its Discontents*], we understand that what Kafka suspends is the phantasm of becoming godlike. By facing his own physical and non-prosthetic existence, Kafka (or his first-person narrator) figures a non-Christian incarnation of a human being becoming human. "How to become what you are," wrote Friedrich Nietzsche in the subtitle of *Ecce homo*. By this means, Kafka refuses the fulfillments and salvations that eventually, in modern times, turn out to be remedies for denying mortality, for eternalizing oneself. Again, I quote Ronell:

> "As has been the case with all such infinitizing inventions (one thinks of the works of Edison, Bell, or Dr. Frankenstein), the fulfillment of a fairy-tale wish, coming very close in omnipotent sway to a god, emerges from a traumatized zone to establish some form of restitutional services: the typewriter originally intended for the blind, the gramophone for the deaf, the telephone clandestinely for those afflicted with speech and hearing impediments." (Ronell 88)

Let me take my remarks on Kafka and the insufficient, but also prosthetic human nature, as a starting point to comment on Cheyne's paper. Her main argument focuses on what she calls a "reflexive approach to disability" which

is encouraged by literature, for example "through the depiction of disabled characters experiencing prejudice" (213). The invitation to reflect upon a narrative or representational element implies a certain relief of accountability that is fundamental for fictional texts. Fictitious representations thus present themselves without at the same time being evaluative. Fiction suspends the field of social acting; the producer of fiction does not have to take on responsibility for everything that happens to his/her text. An evaluative criticism is foregrounded by the distinction between representation and interpretation. I quote Cheyne who follows David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's argument on "disability as narrative prosthesis:"

> "[...] I am not aiming to fix these novels as 'positive' representations which should be placed on some hypothetical list of 'acceptable' representations of disability [...]. Rather, I am arguing for a positive *interpretation* of these novels: one which sees them as being potentially useful in the struggle to break down social barriers." (212)

I generally agree with Cheyne in the sense that interpreting representations means to accept responsibility for what one's interpretation suggests. But does that imply that fictitious texts cannot provide the reader with evaluative arguments? One might think of how John L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* suspended literature from the realm of successful speech acts:[17] Can we, as a result, make an advantage out of this disadvantage attributed to literature's speech acts, if not their dismissal?[18]

How then do we conceive the role of 'reflection' when talking of *reflexive representations*? Are we, on the one hand, to follow a reader response theory that is based on blank spaces in the text? Where does reflection take place in representational processes? If there is a mediated space, a communicative (or

17 | The discussions that followed Austin commented on his distinction between 'serious' speech acts and 'parasitic' speech acts, in which the latter indicate fictional speech acts as 'not serious' in the sense of not including perlocutionary effects.

18 | Of course, one might turn Austin's argument against itself: If language is designated by something Jacques Derrida calls 'iterability,' literature cannot be suspended from speech acts or, to take it a step further, any speech act may be 'read' as literature. The question is, what makes us believe in a certain responsibility (or power, or insistence, etc.) when someone is saying something. The case of literature in speech act theory, thus, is the case of a larger metaphysical argument: Is there something 'present' when someone is saying something to someone, and is this 'presence' (force, power, etc.) going 'through' language (the act of saying something) from someone to someone else (by saying something)? And how can we describe analytically the importance of speech acts of literature for a – more philosophical – field of discussion in this sense? (see Miller 2001).

evaluative) break, between representation and interpretation, where do we find the opposing idea of closeness in the sense of 'a status without the interrupting of reflection?'

In the case of literature, one might point out that literary texts are associated with both the distance from and open spaces for the reader's imagination, as well as proximity, closeness to life. I therefore point out the topos that literature has its "setting in life" ["Sitz im Leben"], as described by Romance scholar Erich Köhler (Köhler 11). To me, it is most likely that the differentiation between 'reflexive' and 'immediate' representation links back to phantasms of literature itself. Probably, the idea that a representational structure might have hallucinating, presentational effects and might therefore potentially be identified with life itself, sounds like one of the phantasms of the Romantic period. In the words of Friedrich Kittler, one might think of the *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, i.e. German hallucinating Romanticism and operative modernism with a technical definition of writing as contrasted with media like film or the gramophone. Taking this into account, I would argue for a historical understanding of the function of literature and its representations. This is not to argue against an evaluative criticism, but against grounding it in a supra-historical concept of representation and its effect structure.

'Fiction' means that one does not need to judge it because the arguments implied are not directly related to the 'factual world,' but rather to its own 'aesthetic world.' Nonetheless, frictions occur, and of course literature might be conceptualized as *littérature engagée*. But even literature that is strongly intertwined with concepts of 'reality' deals with the power of fiction and not primarily with facts. In a way, reading in the modern sense of 'silent' reading is very private, and so should be a reader's judgment. It is the voice that occupies public domains. To use literary texts in a polemic manner always throws a reflection back at the usage itself: Why and to what end should we blame fictitious texts as if the positions of figures in the text were those of people in flesh and blood? But sometimes fictitious figures may act like 'real' people and the other way round, as we have learned from the novels as well as academic essays of Umberto Eco (see for example *Name*; *Walks*). The question (which may be the wrong question) is: Does 'good' literature have to be likeable? And, what do we value when reading literature? Probably, in literature we cannot separate questions of content (which might be the object of an evaluative criticism) and form (which might be regarded as 'innovative,' 'old fashioned,' etc.). So I would argue for literature's content as always contingent on its form. We can never know about the reliability of meaning in literature without asking about the enactment of a figure, a narrator, a plot, or an argument.

To return to Kafka, my reading of his brief fragment would stress the distinctive and specific position Kafka expresses. Agreeing to the prosthetic character of existence, Kafka discovers the beauty of a position of being not

capable. His kindred spirits in the history of literature are, among others, Fyodor M. Dostoevsky and his contemporary Robert Walser. With a sidestep to Walser, Kafka's congenial soul mate, I conclude my comment. This Swiss author once wrote about the perfection of our earthly imperfection:

> "O, how the errors gleam with perfection, and how failures are fragrant with alluring skillfulness, and how everything that seems to be right is wrong, and what truth lies in all that is false and how unimportant is *the* important and how are unimportances taken importantly, and this has to be this way, as it just *suits* us so." (Walser 106 et. seq.; translation by author)[19]

In opposition to all traditions which provide us with ideas of perfection, of wholeness and the holy with the promise of an idealized afterlife, in the works of Kafka and Walser the idea of redemption returns to human existence in its bare sense.

In Walser, by the way, we find a person who embodies all these metaphorizations and incredible reversals in 'real' life. Against his will, he was hospitalized in 1929 with the tentative diagnosis of schizophrenia, although he was never examined again. He stayed in a mental hospital for almost 28 years until his death in 1956, accepting his fatally changed life path. Of course, we can also learn something here about the 'negative' treatment of people displaying behavioral problems, but I think the distinctiveness of his attitude and, in a certain way, superior behavior also poses questions about the relation between the normal and the unique, and how both are found intertwined in this peculiar biography. As far as we know, Walser stopped being an author from the moment he officially became a patient. Asked about whether he received preferential treatment in hospital, Walser briefly answered Carl Seelig, who was one of the few people who remembered the once famous poet, and his answer may be taken as a parable of life in hospital: "Why should I change to a better ward? Wasn't it you who remained a private (lance-corporal), without the conspicuous behavior of an officer? Look, I am a private like you and want to remain one. I have little appetite for becoming an officer as you have. I want to live among the people and vanish into them" (Seelig 93; translation by author).[20]

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19 | Original quote (italics marks a hypothetical reading): "O, wie schimmern die Fehler vor Vollkommenheit, und wie duften Mißlungenheiten nach verführerischem Gekonnthaben, und wie ist alles, was richtig zu sein scheint, unrichtig, und was liegt in allem Falschen für eine Wahrheit, und wie unwichtig ist *das* Wichtige und wie wichtig werden Unwichtigkeiten genommen, und das muß so sein, es *liegt* uns so."

20 | Original quote: "Warum soll ich in eine höhere Abteilung wollen? Sind Sie nicht auch Gefreiter geblieben, ohne Offiziersallüren? Sehen Sie, so eine Art Gefreiter bin

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auch ich und will es bleiben. Ich habe sowenig Appetit zum Offizier wie Sie. Ich will mit dem Volk leben und in ihm verschwinden."

Benjamin Haas

Dis-/ability and Normalism: Patterns of Inclusion in Romance Literature

Introduction

The historical and cultural construction of dis-/ability and ab-/normality requires transdisciplinary analyses informed by cultural studies. At the same time, there is a need for adequate theoretical frameworks. Ria Cheyne's approach offers a stimulating way of incorporating aspects of cultural dis-/ability studies into the field of romance studies and vice versa.

In this response, I would like to focus first on the key points of Cheyne's essay. In an attempt to acknowledge the possibility of different interpretations, I aim at scrutinising the potential effects of dis-/ability representations in romance novels as discussed by Cheyne. With this objective in mind, I will not only discuss the relationship between the text and its readership, but also explore how the reader's ways of interpreting depictions might be influenced by their identity, attitudes and conceptions of normality. By showing that interpretations are not determined by depictions but are also actively constructed by readers, I want to underline the need to examine the historically and culturally contingent processes of meaning-making (see Hall "Encoding"), that is, following Stuart Hall I contend that messages have to be meaningfully decoded before they are able to generate effects. In short, how the reception itself might work requires examination before we are able to talk about 'positive' interpretations of dis-/ability potentially developed by the reading public. I therefore propose to historicize the dynamics between the narrative and the reader. From this perspective, it might be possible to develop a better understanding of how stereotypes towards dis-/ability are structured and could be overcome with regards to patterns of inclusion.

Representation of Dis-/ability in Popular Romance Novels

Cheyne states that the representation of dis-/ability in romance novels works differently when compared to other genres of literature. This is primarily a result of the structural factors inherent to the genre, such as demanding a happily-ever-after ending or the necessity of secondary and yardstick roles. Cheyne shows that the de-eroticization and marginalisation of dis-/abled characters which, as other analyses in the field of cultural dis-/ability studies have revealed (see Mollow and McRuer 4), is rather common in romance fiction, does not occur in the novels of Mary Balogh. Instead, in her works characters with disabilities are part of the community and have fulfilling romantic relationships. Furthermore, they do not simply function as a "narrative prosthesis" (see Mitchell and Snyder

6-10), but rather perform their own roles and tasks within the plot. In the novels analysed by Cheyne, dis-/ability seems not to be absent from what is commonly understood as the 'good and normal life.' These interesting research findings demonstrate the potential of applying a cultural dis-/ability studies perspective in popular romance studies, thus extending the scope of both fields.

Representational Effects

Nonetheless, the impact of discriminatory prejudices and stereotypes towards dis-/abled persons is also comprehensively covered in Balogh's novels. Based on this observation, Cheyne argues in favour of the possibility that these representations could encourage readers to critically reflect upon their own conceptualisations of dis-/ability. At this point it is appropriate to take a closer look into how the individual reception of romance novels in particular, and cultural messages in general, might work. In the following, I will discuss whether widening the focus of the individual reader's modes of reception from representation to interpretation advances two consequences: first, a more profound analysis of the relationship between text and readership and, second, the conceptualisation of dis-/ability following the approach of normalism.

As a first step, I will focus on Stuart Hall's model of encoding and decoding to acquire a better understanding of the relationship between the source and the receiver (see "Encoding" 509).[21] Specifically, I will discuss how readers might interpret fluid depictions of dis-/ability and examples of social exclusion within narratives. From here, I want to infer how readers might themselves engage with novels and thus consider the possible impacts this engagement might have upon them. Taking up Cheyne's observation that a character's conceptualization of dis-/ability is connected to their own concepts of normality, I will underline the complexity of the possible representational effects connected to the reading public's concepts of normality.

Meaning-Making

According to Hall's model of encoding and decoding (see "Encoding"), there is always a *lack of fit* between the production (encoding) and the reception

21 | While Hall is focusing on the communication processes at play in television, his theory of encoding and decoding is also applicable to literary interpretation (see for example Pavšič 2007; Radway 1991). Novels can be seen as producing and circulating cultural messages, which is why differences in production and consumption should be considered. In light of this reception theory, readers are not seen as passive consumers. Instead, how the text functions in relation to its historical context and how it relates to the individual reader is analysed.

(decoding) of messages. This gap is caused by structural differences and an asymmetry between encoder and receiver. Therefore, discursive aspects must be considered in accordance with the production of a message and individual backgrounds related to its reception. The correspondence between message and meaning is to be seen as constructed, shaping the dynamics of meaning-making and creating a fluidity of meanings. As Hall points out, three different types of decoding or reading positions are possible: Readers can either confirm, negotiate or oppose the presented message (see "Encoding" 508-517).

Hall indicates that the meaning of a reading deduced by a reader is not necessarily the same as that intended by the writer or supposed by other readers. Consequently, there is a need to consider meaning as constructed through both the language and the concepts that readers have in mind. Therefore, meaning is never fixed but historically contingent; it relies upon different cultural and historical backgrounds. Hence, representation and meaning-making should be seen as a process in which the reader, in creating meaning, appears to be more important than the writer (see "Representation" 32 -33).

Thus following Hall and in contrast to Cheyne's argument, I contend that meaning does not reside in the author's narrative depictions, but instead is produced by readers in an active process of interpretation. These dynamics of meaning-making and varied audience interpretations are validated by Alison Wilde's media analyses of popular TV shows, in which she examines responses of dis-/ability depictions by active audiences. Referring to Hall's model of "encoding – decoding" as well as Abercrombie and Longhurst's "Spectacle/ Performance paradigm,"[22] audience interpretations are seen as viewing performances. Wilde argues that these viewing performances depend on crucial aspects such as engagement, viewer identity, and, most importantly, how modes of depiction relate to existing attitudes and feelings (see 36-40). She writes: "But *how* people are depicted on television is of greater significance. Viewers are more likely to seek images that reassure them of their own normality or against private feelings of ab-/normality, whatever they may be" (42).

Wilde suggests that it is necessary to approach viewing as a performative act influenced by representation and identity. Hence, "characterisations are used to strengthen or weaken cultural identifications and to articulate, negotiate or maintain patterns of exclusion and inclusion between people" (ibid.). Wilde's analysis shows that the reception of a certain message depends on the

22 | Abercrombie and Longhurst argue that media, spectator identities, cultural representations, and outlooks must be investigated in a dialogical manner, where media and everyday life appear to be interwoven. This results in a relational form of performativity, where the cultural distance between performers and audience is eliminated. Consequently, the viewing performances are related to emotional attachment and individual identities.

manner of depiction as well as on social context. Thus, the effects of representations are ambivalent and contradictory, and ultimately identity and representation seem to be mutually dependent. It therefore follows that a qualitatively and quantitatively more balanced representation of dis-/ability, as observed in Balogh's novels, is likely to have positive effects on its readers, encouraging them to have more empathy towards dis-/abled characters, but this relation is far from inevitable. Furthermore, when considering reading as a performance influenced by the interplay of representation and identity, one must concede that personal conceptions of normality and ab-/normality might also play an important role (see ibid.).

Interpretations of Normalism

Following the assumption that interpretation is linked with identity and, as demonstrated by Wilde, with personal beliefs of normality in particular, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the latter. Such an approach is also supported by Cheyne's essay, which analyses examples in Balogh's novels that are explicitly concerned with the discussion of norms. This becomes particularly obvious when non-dis-/abled characters – like Claudia in *Simply Perfect* – make their 'narrow' conceptions of normality, or the social construction of norms, a subject of discussion in their personal responses to dis-/abled characters. In addition, a focus on normality emerges, since narratives of (de-)normalization have certain effects on the construction of dis-/ability (see Link "Erzählen").

In light of the reader's concepts of normality and in order to specify the historical and culturally contingent processes of reception, I will refer to Jürgen Link's concept of normalism (see "Versuch"), which distinguishes between normativity and normality. Link claims that it is essential to differentiate between "normative norms" and "normalistic norms." Normative norms can be described as social and legal norms that are imposed on only a few people, whereas normalistic norms function through all individuals comparing themselves to each other in accordance with a standard. Hence, normality appears less static, functioning as a range norm based on change and dynamics while requiring self-normalization by individuals. Conversely, normativity works as a point norm aiming at stability and conformity. With regard to normalistic norms, the two strategies of protonormalism and flexible normalism must also be differentiated (see Link, "Versuch" 77-82). Protonormalism is orientated towards normativity. It has a narrow normal range and works through a strict separation of the normal and the pathological. Flexible normalization, in contrast, has a wide normal range and expanded boundaries where temporary separations and categorisations are possible. It is thus possible to analyse intersections and ambivalences between the two strategies in order to recognize new boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

Even in flexible normalism exclusion remains an option since the normal range cannot be widened endlessly, whereas a return to narrow zones of normality and protonormalistic strategies is always possible (see Link, "Grenze" 136). Dis-/ability provides a good example for considering this dilemma. Even when strategies of a flexible normalism can be witnessed, for example in services for dis-/abled persons and in rehabilitation policies, the polarity of normality and dis-/ability still continues without being dissolved (see Waldschmidt "Normalisierung"). With regards to readers' "own normality" (see Wilde 42) and how they respond to depictions of certain characters, the focus of analysis needs to be widened. If it is true that 'everybody wants to be normal' (see Waldschmidt, "Who is Normal" 195), we need to explore in greater detail what this means nowadays both socially and culturally.

A Need for "Critical Frameworks"[23]

As mentioned above, while the relationship between the text and the reader evaluated with reference to normality makes possible a positive interpretation by the reader, it does not make it inevitable. On the contrary, when speaking of individual interpretations by readers, protonormalistic strategies as well as temporary separations of dis-/abled characters are still possible. Therefore, to distinguish between patterns of in- and exclusion, the ambivalent processes of meaning-making need to be analysed in conjunction with different conceptions of normality. This makes it essential to consider the identity and attitudes of the reader and his or her conception of normality, which can serve to strengthen or weaken cultural identifications of dis-/ability.

With regard to the obvious complexity of representational effects, I would like to stress two additional aspects concerning modes of reception and their analyses. First, a historical perspective on the dynamics between spectacle and spectator might be beneficial (see Garland-Thomson 136). Focussing on the culturally and historically specific construction of dis-/ability in contrast to the idealised bodies and identities or "normate subject positions" (see ibid. 8), this type of approach could call into question the ideological structures that constitute 'otherness' and therefore make and interpret dis-/ability (see ibid. 135). Second, a 'discursive approach' according to Michel Foucault could deepen the understanding of subject-positions depending on relations of power and knowledge. These two perspectives seem not only to be compatible with Hall's call for a constructivist approach (see "Representation" 25), but they are also

23 | In her book *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson underlines the need for a "critical framework" focusing on social relations (Erving Goffman), cultural responses (Mary Douglas), and historical delineations (Foucault) in order to analyse dis-/ability as a historically and culturally specific social construction (see 141).

favourable in acknowledging the contingent cultural and historical backgrounds that could affect individual reception. Thus, the attempt to stimulate potentially positive interpretations of dis-/ability would require a critical reconstruction of meaning-making. Taking into account discursive formations (see Foucault) influencing concepts of dis-/ability and normality could contextualize the dynamics between narrative and reader.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to illustrate that the complexity of meaning-making demands critical frameworks which focus on the social, cultural, and historical aspects of a reader's reception. Starting with Cheyne's observation of the different depictions of dis-/ability in romance literature and her suggestion that they stress the importance of attitudes creating welcoming environments, I wanted to emphasise the need to analyse the underlying structures of stereotypes in terms of *techniques of normalization*. Referring to Link's concept of normality and considering the flexible-normalistic character of inclusion (see "Denkanstöße"), it must be taken into account that even a widened normal range with regard to depiction and reception can be accompanied by exclusive practices. In other words, strategies of flexible normalism do not necessarily have to be identical with patterns of inclusion. This claim highlights the need for further research on normality as a discourse-framing category (see Lingenauber; Waldschmidt "Behindertsein"). Finally, I have argued for a perspective that not only supports interdisciplinary dialogues between cultural studies and dis-/ability studies, but one that also serves as an example for developing a framework of critical dis-/ability analysis by drawing on different fields of research.

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