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Elizabeth A. Wheeler

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No Monsters in This Fairy Tale: *Wonder* and the New Children’s Literature

Elizabeth A. Wheeler

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A roadblock stands in the way of applying disability studies to children’s literature. Disability studies emphasizes the public profile of disability as a shared culture, a community, and a political movement. A core value of the discipline is the social model of disability, as opposed to the individual model. However, most children don’t grow up around others who share their disability. Furthermore, most realist children’s books stay in the relatively small circle of the family and the school. Yet something exciting happens when we read recent works through the lens of disability studies. Twenty-first-century children’s books stage a revolution in the portrayal of kids with disabilities and the portrayal of their communities as well. Children’s literature offers a window into the political changes of the past forty years. Specifically, it offers insight into new forms of community.

R. J. Palacio’s first novel, *Wonder* (2012), exemplifies the recent crop of children’s books with rich portrayals of disability community. *Wonder* is a classic middle grade chapter book that doesn’t stray far from the small circle of family and school. No one shares the main character’s disability. Yet *Wonder* presents a disability community in the making. It is the type of community most children with disabilities experience: a circle of able-bodied people at home and school united together through their experiences with disability and prejudice. A middle school serves as a microcosm of a changing society. *Wonder* shows how the public presence of people with disabilities benefits a whole society, a society caught in the moment when a disability first goes public.

Wonder stars a ten-year-old boy named August Pullman who has a conspicuous facial disability caused by a rare genetic condition. Homeschooled because of frequent surgeries, August goes to school for the first time in fifth grade. The reader follows him as he gains the skills necessary to manage the

Elizabeth A. Wheeler is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Oregon and director of the University of Oregon Literacy Initiative. Her work has appeared most recently in *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, and she is currently writing a book entitled *HandiLand: Kids with Disabilities in Twenty-First Century America*.

stares of others and thrive despite them. Released in February 2012, *Wonder* has proved immensely popular. It has been on the *New York Times*'s best seller list of children's middle grade books since April 2012 ("Best Sellers: Children's Chapter Books") and has spent many months at number one on that (renamed) list ("Best Sellers: Children's Middle Grade"). Part of the book's artistry lies in the way R. J. Palacio rings changes on three competing models of disability: the social model, the individual or medical model, and what I am calling the monster model. The novel reworks disability representations of the past in paving the way to a better future.

A Revolution in Middle Grade Books

Wonder is part of a larger revolution in US middle grade chapter books. Take, for example, the ten chapter books that have won in the middle school category of the American Library Association's Schneider Family Book Award. Founded in 2004, the Schneider Award honors "a book that embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences" ("Schneider"). That such a book award exists is remarkable in itself. Other signs of change include disabled protagonists and greater acceptance of disability; in seven out of ten Schneider Award winners, the first-person narrator and protagonist is a preteen with a disability. While children's literature has a long history of disabled characters as best friends and inspirational figures, the disabled protagonist is something almost entirely new. These seven books are all realist problem novels depicting a main character between fifth and eighth grade and his or her life at home and in school. Their first-person narratives employ the casual conversational style inherited from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. This intimacy of tone pulls young readers very close to the perspective of the protagonist, signaling the adult belief that kids in the general readership are willing to identify with a disabled protagonist. This development makes the books truly revolutionary.

Other signs of change in the award-winning books include self-acceptance and family acceptance of disability. Many protagonists take a journey out of fear and silence into acceptance. Such novels include Wendy Mass's *A Mango-Shaped Space* (2003), Kimberly Newton Fusco's *Tending to Grace* (2004), Nora Raleigh Baskin's *Anything but Typical* (2009), and Joan Bauer's *Close to Famous* (2011). Or, in books like Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Becoming Naomi León* (2004) and Leslie Connor's *Waiting for Normal* (2008), characters don't even need to take such a journey. Disability is already a matter-of-fact part of their lives. For instance, Addie in *Waiting for Normal* is an old pro at advocating for her dyslexia. She wins a spot in her new school's orchestra after she explains her learning process to the music teacher, who then accommodates Addie by giving her the sheet music before rehearsals.

Jordan Sonnenblick's 2010 novel *After Ever After* offers glimpses into disability as a cultural and even political identity. The main character, Jeffrey, and his

best friend, Tad, are both cancer survivors. Through insider humor interlaced with adolescent your-mama jokes, readers get insights into minority group identity. On Jeffrey's behalf, Tad walks out (or rather, rolls his wheelchair out) of a state test because it allows no accommodation for students with disabilities such as the cognitive after-effects of Jeffrey's cancer treatments.

These refreshing new portrayals of disability are surpassed in *Wonder*, which presents an even stronger challenge to ableism, or antidisability prejudice. The novel goes beyond self-acceptance and family acceptance, beyond insider humor and protest, to portray an entire community transformed by disability inclusion. *Wonder* represents not only a change in the portrayal of a character with a disability, but a transformation in the world that surrounds him.

Wonder's multivoiced narration contributes greatly to its fresh portrayal of disability. The story starts with the intimacy of the first-person problem novel, then keeps switching young narrators to present a whole world in microcosm. The story begins with the thoughts of August Pullman as he enters school for the first time, then moves to his older sister Via and his new school friends, Summer and Jack. As the disability community grows, *Wonder* pulls more and more distant characters into the task of narration, reaching out to include Via's new boyfriend, Justin, and her former best friend, Miranda, then coming full circle back to August.

In a single novel, Palacio embraces all the viewpoints found in the Schneider Award winners. Like *Tending to Grace*, *Wonder* features an isolated narrator who comes into self-acceptance. Like Cynthia Lord's *Rules* (2006), *Wonder* features a sister narrator tired of her family revolving around a younger brother's disability. Like *Anything but Typical* and Tracie Vaughn Zimmer's *Reaching for Sun* (2007), *Wonder* features able-bodied characters who make their first friends with disabilities. Out of all these books, *Wonder* is not only the happiest but also the most revolutionary.

A Disability Studies Reading

At first glance, *Wonder* might not seem like the best standard-bearer for a disability revolution, or the best candidate for a disability studies reading. Part of the book's appeal lies in an old-fashioned inspirational discourse in which the hero achieves success through individual striving rather than social change. If we follow the logic of this discourse, we would say that August Pullman overcomes his fellow students' initial horror at his disability and makes the whole school his friend through his extraordinary character. At the novel's climax, the middle school graduation ceremony, the principal gives August an award for being the student "whose strength carries up the most hearts by the attraction of his own" (Palacio 304). The entire audience in the school auditorium rises to applaud the underdog hero who finally receives his due: "Not just the front rows, but the whole audience suddenly got up on their feet, whooping, hollering, clapping like crazy. It was a standing ovation. For me" (306).

There are three problems with this inspirational discourse. The first, as I have suggested, is that it privileges extraordinary individual strength over collective political action. The second is that it is clichéd. We have seen these standing ovations in far too many movies and TV shows. The third problem lies in the vision of a child with disabilities as the one who “carries up the most hearts by the attraction of his own.” This idea skates way too close to a trope common in children’s literature, a trope I call “the disabled child as educational toy.” Santiago Solis has criticized children’s books in which “morality is firmly established as a theme in order to portray people with disabilities as possessing exceptional humanizing qualities” (n. pag.).

Along these lines, *Wonder* also skates close to a plot device Lois Keith calls the “school project” trope, wherein an able-bodied kid befriends a kid with a disability as a homework assignment in social studies or community service. The able-bodied student “meets a disabled person, learns to be a bit more humble and goes back to school a better, wiser person” (3). August’s future best friend, Jack, and his future nemesis, Julian, first meet him when the principal asks them to show him around the school in order to “teach them a thing or two about empathy, and friendship, and loyalty” (Palacio 163). In the tropes of the school project and the educational toy, kids with disabilities exist to serve the personal development of the able-bodied kids. Yet the subtle character development in *Wonder* goes much deeper than these plot devices, to show the complex struggle of building disability community. *Wonder* earns its happy ending. In my argument here, I will focus on the reciprocal friendship that grows between August and Jack. August is much more than an insight machine for Jack, much more than a temporary feel-good solution to the problem of disability prejudice. The novel depicts many obstacles in the path to an honest, sustainable friendship between an able-bodied kid and a kid with a disability. Both boys grow.

Ultimately, the novel’s appeal relies not on the individual strivings of the main character but on a vision of a community transforming itself. And *Wonder*’s vision of community is entirely consistent with a disability studies vision of social change. It is a type of community under-theorized in disability studies, yet it is the one most children with disabilities experience: a circle of able-bodied people at home and in school united together through their experiences with disability and ableist prejudice. *Wonder* explores what it means to have or acquire a “next-to” identity for the able-bodied family and friends of someone with a disability. Inclusion happens from the rarely explored viewpoint of the kids involved, rather than the adults’.

In depicting the school and home life of a child with a disability, *Wonder* oscillates between realism and utopia. Both literary modes help readers understand the lived realities of people with disabilities. In its less realistic moments, *Wonder* creates a fairy tale of inclusion, to show the benefits for everyone when a child with a disability enters a previously segregated school for the first time. Although set in the present day, *Wonder* allows readers to experience the first generation of mainstreaming following the passage of the Education of All

Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (Shapiro 69). (EAHC was superseded in 1990 by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA].) The novel adopts the social model of disability, defining August's problem as other people staring rather than something intrinsic to August himself. Disability studies scholar and founder Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes:

When people with stareable bodies . . . enter into the public eye, when they no longer hide themselves or allow themselves to be hidden, the visual landscape enlarges. Their public presence can expand the range of the bodies we expect to see and broaden the terrain where we expect to see such bodies. (9)

Jack puts it more simply: "First of all, you do get used to his face" (Palacio 142). *Wonder* plays out the competing concepts of disability named and analyzed in disability studies: the social model, the medical model, and what we might call a monster model. The novel recapitulates the history of disability representation. It moves beyond damaging ideas, shifts the weight of these ideas off August's shoulders, and leaves room for a more humane model of disability.

One of the conceptual breakthroughs of the disability rights movement was the separation of disability from impairment and the redefinition of disability as a social issue. While many scholars have since questioned the clear-cut distinction between disability and impairment, the social definition of disability is nonetheless a bedrock of contemporary thinking. This conceptual breakthrough accompanied the ardent explosion of disability activism in the 1970s. In 1976 a group of British activists with disabilities, the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), declared that "it is necessary to grasp the distinction between the physical impairment and the social situation, called 'disability,' of people with such an impairment" (qtd. in Oliver 22). British scholar Michael Oliver spread this redefinition to the international disability community, coining the terms "the social model" and "the individual model" to correspond to the distinction between disability and impairment (30). Thus disability became a political problem to be solved by changing society rather than a medical problem to be treated by doctors. The "medical model" is often considered synonymous with the individual model. Disability theorist Tobin Siebers argues that the medical model's isolation robs people with disabilities of "a sense of political community" (54).

Wonder catches the Pullman family in transition from the medical model to the social model. Until fifth grade, August's mother has homeschooled him: "People think I haven't gone to school because of the way I look, but it's not that. It's because of all the surgeries I've had. Twenty-seven since I was born" (Palacio 4). Having two or three surgeries a year, and being small for his age, August "used to get sick a lot. That's why my parents decided it was better if I didn't go to school. I'm much stronger now, though" (4). August's years in hospitals and in bed at home have confined him to the isolation of the medical model. But this is just the backstory. For August's entry into fifth grade, the novel steers right into the social model of disability and stays there. Palacio

describes his disability as entirely social, containing no element of impairment. In response to the hostile parent of another child, the school principal declares that August “does not have special needs. He is neither disabled, handicapped, nor developmentally delayed in any way.” Furthermore, “Auggie is an extremely good student” (163).

Importantly, August portrays himself in terms of the social model. From the novel’s first page, he refuses to describe what he looks like. The problem lies not in his face, but in other people’s brains: “Here’s what I think: The only reason I’m not ordinary is that no one else sees me this way” (3). Palacio offers no description of August’s face until eighty-eight pages into the novel, from the viewpoint of his older sister Via. Not until page 104 does Via name his disability, and then she gives only the formal Latin diagnosis, not the common name. When August describes a particular surgery on his jaw, he says that “[t]hey had taken a piece of bone from my hip bone to insert into my chin to make it look more normal, so I was hurting in a lot of places” (54). From August’s viewpoint, the surgery was done to make him fit in better socially, not to improve function, even though he experiences that as well. For example, his jaw surgeries have allowed him to eat solid food rather than receive nutrition through a tube in his stomach.

This insistence on the social model allows Palacio to demonstrate what happens when society alone needs to change. As the bumper sticker says, “Attitudes are the real disability.” The kids in August’s new school just need to stop staring and get used to his face. Nonetheless, the reliance on a purely social model of disability has its limitations. First, as Tobin Siebers argues, the social model can deny the realities of the body (53). Palacio represents August as having no impairments, even though sometimes he wakes up choking on his own saliva and he gets hearing aids in the course of the novel (99, 211). Nor does August suffer any enduring pain or complications from his long surgical history. When August starts Beecher Prep his mother only needs to get over her own nervousness; she doesn’t have to teach the school nurse how to tube-feed him or suction excess saliva out of his lungs.

Second, the social model can oversimplify political realities. Disability inclusion at school usually requires adaptations of curriculum or physical space, and additional help from staff. In a purely social model, all people have to change is their attitudes. The school doesn’t have to spring for expensive equipment. The students don’t have to learn a new way of communicating. The teachers don’t have to modify their instruction. They don’t even have to rearrange the furniture. Palacio’s model for understanding disability relies on kindness, not civil rights. Beecher Prep is a private school with no inclusion mandate. It doesn’t have to guarantee August services in an Individualized Education Plan, so it’s a good thing he doesn’t seem to need them.

Since *Wonder* is a work of fiction, we cannot blame it for failing to present an entirely realistic picture of school inclusion. And the novel is political in its own way: it presents a fairy tale of school life before and after the Individuals

with Disabilities Education Act. The scenario is deliberately oversimplified and exaggerated. On one hand, we have a child entering school for the first time in fifth grade, one of the most norming moments of social existence. On the other hand, we have a private school completely devoid of any connection to disability. This scenario is like a carefully controlled lab experiment. From this experiment we learn what happens when a child with a disability singlehandedly desegregates a school. We see able-bodied people gather a community around the child and come into a disability identity of their own.

Points of View

Wonder's multivoiced narration helps Palacio even out the power dynamics between disabled and able-bodied characters. She reaches inside all these young people's heads as they formulate and reformulate their ideas about disability, and the multivoiced narration brings readers into closer and closer allegiance with August in his struggle for acceptance. By revealing a character's inner self, the novel form opens the door to empathy. Inside August's viewpoint for most of the novel, readers avoid the risk of being shocked by his appearance. We can focus on how he feels instead of how he looks: "I feel ordinary. Inside" (3). This story would operate very differently if it were a picture book aimed at younger children, where readers would see August immediately. *Wonder* contains minimal illustrations, one at the start of each narrator's story, and the pictures portray every child and teen in the same abstract way, showing one eye in a simple black-and-white outline of a face.

August's narration provides access to his inner pain, but the outside views show us something else. As the perspective shifts, new school friends, like Summer and Jack, describe Auggie as an ordinary nice guy with personality traits valued in fifth grade. Exterior views of Auggie show his everyday likability, precisely from the point of view that usually causes him the most grief: other kids observing him. Through similar portrayals of August by many narrators, Palacio builds a well-rounded, believable, and charming character. Multiple narrators create a consistent picture of Auggie's humor, loyalty, and evenness of disposition despite the drama all around him. Like his school friends, readers become increasingly attached to him in the course of the school year.

While August's character remains consistent throughout the novel, he does change and grow in an important way: his ability to cope with other people seeing his remarkable face. August defines staring as the main feature of his disability, the thing that makes him different from other kids: "I know ordinary kids don't make other ordinary kids run away screaming in playgrounds. I know ordinary kids don't get stared at wherever they go" (3). Staring is also the main reason he doesn't want to go to school at first: "Everyone will stare at me at school," I said, suddenly crying" (10). In *Staring: How We Look*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson offers a disability studies theory of staring that illuminates August's experiences. Importantly, she shifts the point of view from the starrer

to the “staree” and to the staree’s humanity, skills, and actions. *Staring* undoes the reification of the extraordinary body in popular culture and in everyday life. Two aspects of Garland-Thomson’s theory of staring are relevant to Auggie’s experience: managing the stare, and the conversion of mythical monsters into real people.

Stare Management 101

Throughout *Wonder*, August quietly insists on his own humanity in the way Garland-Thomson prescribes in *Staring*: “If an arc of empathy is to leap across the breach opened up by staring, persistence and generosity must prevail on both sides. Starees must insist on recognition as fellow humans by wielding an array of interpersonal techniques that the commonly embodied need not acquire” (94). *Wonder* charts August’s growing sophistication at managing the stare through a variety of techniques. His increasing maturity indicates that going to school has benefits for him, not just for the students around him. The novel draws our attention to staring and starers as it traces August’s difficult route through fifth grade. However, if we follow Garland-Thomson’s method and concentrate on August as the staree, we see exactly how he matures in the course of the novel: if we focus on the starers, as the narration does, we experience some terrible moments; but if we focus on the staree, a more hopeful picture emerges.

From the beginning, August has a fair degree of staring sophistication. He knows exactly when people notice his face, even though they try to hide it, and he sees kids express distaste “when they think I’m not looking” (72). What changes are Auggie’s responses. In the beginning, he avoids exchanging glances with people. On his first visit to Beecher Prep his eyes are always down, looking at people’s shoes, the floor, or a piece of old gum stuck to the bottom of the principal’s desk (22–25). Like many middle schoolers, he uses his hair to hide his eyes: “One of the reasons I grew my hair long last year was that I like how my bangs cover my eyes: it helps block out the things I don’t want to see” (21). After a month, August reports that “being at school was awful in the beginning. I knew after the first couple of days that word had gotten around about me, because every once in a while I’d catch a kid elbowing his friend as they passed me, or talking behind their hands as I walked by them. I can only imagine what they were saying about me. Actually, I prefer not to even try to imagine it” (61).

Such reactions would be distressing for anyone, but even more so for a ten-year-old new to the school experience. If we focus on the other kids and what they might be saying, this scene is indeed awful. However, if we focus on Auggie’s own viewpoint, we can find something positive going on: Auggie can only see kids elbowing their friends or talking behind their hands *if he’s looking at them*. Like Auggie himself, things are just starting to look up.

The next step after looking up is an exchange of glances. Garland-Thomson writes that “we are perhaps most alive to one another when we are face-to-face” (97). August makes his first friends at school through face-to-face encounters. The initial encounter is with Jack Will, one of the kids who shows August around the school. Jack “held the double doors open for me, and as I passed by, he looked me right in the face, kind of daring me to look back at him, which I did. Then I actually smiled” (Palacio 29). Because of the shape of his mouth, it isn’t always easy to tell when Auggie is smiling, “But somehow Jack Will got that I had smiled at him. And he smiled back” (30). This exchange gives Auggie the boost he needs to break his silence and talk back to the school bully. The friendship with Jack can grow because Jack has the persistence and generosity needed to hold Auggie’s gaze. This type of sustained looking respects Auggie’s personhood and contrasts with other kids’ sneaky stares followed by averted eyes.

It is another good sign when August has a friendly face-to-face encounter at lunch on his first day. A girl named Summer comes to sit across from him at his empty cafeteria table. August must give her a sustained look, because he describes her actions and appearance in some detail. When another girl suggests she switch tables away from Auggie, Summer stays put and regards him quite matter-of-factly: “Summer looked at me, shrugged-smiled, and took another bite of her mac and cheese” (51). Looking at Auggie while sitting across from him is no big deal to her. She calmly continues eating.

Along with face-to-face encounters, “next-to” experiences are important as well. You can learn a great deal by walking next to someone with a minority identity you don’t share. Walking to classes with Auggie, Jack experiences the staring for himself. He starts making his way into disability community, acquiring a “next-to” identity through shared experiences. He starts acting like Auggie’s family: at first he replicates Auggie’s parents’ management style, pretending not to notice the stares; then he replicates Auggie’s big sister’s approach, fantasizing about beating up the starers. (A new anger at society’s treatment of people with disabilities is a sign that one may be coming into the community.) Back in the classroom, sitting next to each other, Jack and Auggie conspire to manage the stares through humor:

Jack whispered, “Do you ever want to beat those kids up?”

I shrugged. “I guess. I don’t know.”

“I’d want to. I think you should get a secret squirt gun or something and attach it to your eyes somehow. And every time someone stares at you, you would squirt them in the face.”

“With some green slime or something,” I answered.

“No, no: with slug juice mixed with dog pee.”

“Yeah!” I said, completely agreeing. (63–64)

Jack finds a way to convert his anger into a bonding moment with Auggie. Most kids enjoy gross-out humor, but it has a special place in the lives of kids with physical disabilities. It is a reminder that everyone has a body, not just the

kids whose bodies draw extra attention. Garland-Thomson writes: “Another psychological dread that staring ignites in the starrer is an unsettling awareness of our own embodiment” (58). If this is true, then gross-out humor turns that awareness from dread to laughter. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his theory of the carnivalesque in literature, argues that bodily humor reverses social hierarchies by upending humanity’s deepest fears: “In the sphere of imagery cosmic fear (as any other fear) is defeated by laughter. Therefore dung and urine, as comic matter that can be interpreted bodily, play an important part in these images” (336). Bodily humor provides a way to make room for disabilities in ableist society.

In the example above, Jack takes the lead in making fun of starrers. A minute or two later, though, August will take the lead and keep it for the rest of the novel. He becomes especially adept at managing the stare through humor. Skill with a punch line is a family trait that August has inherited along with his rare gene mutation. By joking around with Jack at school the way he jokes around with his dad at home, he extends his disability community.

We nodded and looked down at our books. Then Jack whispered: “Are you always going to look this way, Auggie? I mean, can’t you get plastic surgery or something?”

I smiled and pointed to my face. “Hello? This *is* after plastic surgery!”

Jack clapped his hand over his forehead and started laughing hysterically.

“Dude, you should sue your doctor!” he answered between giggles. (64; original emphasis)

Here is one of the many moments where readers see Auggie’s charm and lovability. He fields Jack’s question by using a stare-management style Garland-Thomson calls “controlling an ensuing demand for explanations” (105). Jack asks a question steeped in the medical model fantasy of curing a disability through surgery. Auggie replies with a bodily realism so blunt it’s funny, and an acceptance characteristic of disability culture at its best. Jack has gotten close enough to Auggie to ask a personal question like this, but the conversation could easily become maudlin. Instead, Auggie steers the conversation away from pity and self-pity. In doing so, he reveals his growing maturity. As Garland-Thomson writes: “Rather than causing narcissism or self-pity, having an unorthodox face can take one out of one’s self because of the responsibility to the other that comes from having to justify one’s looks to the world” (107). The same strategy of converting pity into good humor fuels Auggie’s continuing friendship with Summer as well. After two weeks of sitting with him at lunch, Summer tells us: “I don’t really feel sorry for him anymore. That might have been what made me sit down with him the first time, but it’s not why I keep sitting down with him. I keep sitting down with him because he is fun” (120).

August gets better and better at defusing pity and hostility through humor. He extends his circle of friends using a strategy of “introducing rather than avoiding the issue of [one’s] appearance” (Garland-Thomson 105). For example:

Like the other day I saw Maya writing a note to Ellie on a piece of Uglydoll stationery, and I don't know why, but I just kind of randomly said: "Did you know the guy who created the Uglydolls based them on me?" . . . And the next day I found a little Uglydoll key chain sitting on my chair with a nice little note from Maya that said: *For the nicest Auggie Doll in the world! xo Maya.* (209–10)

Eventually, Auggie will learn how to direct his punch lines at the ableist world and not at himself.

Auggie's comic nonchalance increases even during the war launched by the "really popular" Julian, who enlists most of the boys at Beecher Prep on his side (171). The boys direct a campaign of hate at Jack for being friends with August; the persecution transfers from August to Jack, who acquires a stigmatized identity of his own. In this case, August directs his punch line not at himself but at Jack's naïveté. Jack is the narrator here:

"It just feels so weird," I said, "to not have people talking to you, pretending you don't even exist."

Auggie started smiling. "Ya think?" he said sarcastically. "Welcome to my world!" (176)

Although Auggie is being sarcastic in welcoming Jack to his world, there is truth behind the quip: Jack has entered the world of disability discrimination through his "next-to" status.

The Monster Model

So far, we have discussed two models of disability present in *Wonder*, the medical and the social. However, *Wonder* also engages an archaic model in order to destroy it. In this model, people with disabilities are monsters. The monster model must be vanquished in order for August's troubles to end. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson points out that the monsters of folklore and fantasy are "elaborations on infrequent, yet regularly occurring, actual human beings" (166). Although inherited from ancient and medieval legends, these monsters thrive in contemporary popular culture. When strangers look at August, they often see not a child but rather a character from *Nightmare on Elm Street* or *Lord of the Rings*, affirming Garland-Thompson's argument that "[t]he sight of living people with unusual bodies invites us to remap fantastic stories of giants, dwarfs, and monsters onto those people. People who look like dwarfs, giants, and monsters draw stares because they are unfamiliar as flesh and too familiar as narrative" (167). R. J. Palacio summons up the horror stories of the past to clear August's way to a better future.

By invoking the creatures of fantasy, Palacio speaks in the native language of twenty-first-century kids raised on movies, comics, and video games. *Wonder* takes too-familiar stories off of August's shoulders, as if removing a Halloween costume. When other kids look at him, grotesque figures from popular culture emerge from their subconscious. Unfortunately, August knows these figures

as well as the other kids do: “Rat boy. Freak. Monster. Freddy Krueger. E. T. Gross-out. Lizard face. Mutant. I know the names they call me” (79). A turning point in the novel takes place at school on Halloween, while August is wearing a Bleeding Scream costume. The novel’s job is to differentiate the boy from the costume. The Bleeding Scream itself doesn’t startle anyone; it’s just a long black robe and a big white skull-face mask oozing fake blood. The costume is so familiar, August and another Bleeding Scream high-five each other on the stairs (76). August likes wearing the mask because it startles everyone so much less than his actual face. He gets a break from the staring. The costume’s name subtly invokes the novel’s repeated use of the word “scream” to describe children’s reactions to August’s face: “ordinary kids run away screaming in playgrounds” (30).

It is no accident that August encounters his worst moment of rejection on Halloween. Anonymous behind his mask, August overhears other boys talking. They are comparing his face to the ugly monsters of popular culture: the horribly burned Darth Sidious from *Star Wars*, a shrunken head, and the repulsive orcs from *The Lord of the Rings*. The bully Julian deliberately wears a Darth Sidious costume to taunt August. If we stop for a moment and picture the scene, Julian’s Darth Sidious and August’s Bleeding Scream are in an over-determined dialogue with each other. Darth Sidious supposedly looks like August, while August’s Scream costume could represent children’s reactions to seeing his own face. The roles are reversed: August plays the part of the starrer, while Julian plays the part of the staree.

It becomes obvious, however, that these too-familiar monsters have nothing to do with August as a real person with real feelings. A boy in a mummy costume speaks, and August recognizes the mummy’s voice. It’s Jack. In the presence of August’s worst enemy, Jack denies his friendship with him: “I mean, he always follows me around. What am I supposed to do?” (77). In this conversation Jack adopts an attitude that can be summed up in the phrase “better dead than disabled.” This belief is familiar from right-to-die movies like *Whose Life is it Anyway?* (1981) and *The Sea Inside* (2004).

“I’ve thought about this a lot,” said the second mummy, sounding serious, “and I really think . . . if I looked like him, seriously, I think that I’d kill myself.”

“You would not,” answered Darth Sidious.

“Yeah, for real,” insisted the same mummy. “I can’t imagine looking in the mirror every day and seeing myself like that. It would be too awful. And getting stared at all the time.” (77)

Jack grapples here with a profound issue he didn’t have to consider until Auggie entered his life. It’s a threshold moment common when an able-bodied person encounters disability for the first time. Jack is trying to make sense of his discovery that Auggie’s life is very different from his own. He is trying to imagine how he would feel if he were Auggie. However, Jack’s empathy leads him to the conclusion that life with such a disability is unendurable. Here the

novel depicts one of the roadblocks on the path to a sustainable friendship between an able-bodied kid and a kid with a disability.

While his denial of their friendship is a lie, Jack's temporary adoption of "better dead than disabled" is an honest attempt to grapple with the cruelties of an ableist world. On the other hand, August has every right to regard Jack's confession to Julian as a betrayal. Jack has walked next to Auggie through the halls and experienced the power of the stares. He has helped Auggie defuse that power through laughter and comic fantasies of retaliation. By saying he'd kill himself rather than "get stared at all the time," Jack gives the power back to the starers. This example exposes the problem with defining next-to identity as a form of disability identity: Jack can distance himself from the problem, while August can't.

This scene is a sucker punch to the gut. Many readers can relate to the shame and shock of middle school rejection. The reader bonds with Auggie more closely here, feels his queasiness and disbelief. Normally, no awfulness from other kids surprises him; it's usually the starers who are startled. But Jack's betrayal comes as a surprise because Auggie has gotten close enough to Jack to let his guard down. Jack's denial of the friendship also comes as a surprise to the reader, who has learned to trust him. What matters at this moment is not the fakery of Halloween masks but August's inner emotional truth. The images of monsters have nothing to do with August and his lived experience of disability. What matters is not the mask but the boy beneath it.

In the United States a real-life political debate rages over the idea of "better dead than disabled." Some disability rights groups regard the idea as a form of antisdisability prejudice. For instance, the group Not Dead Yet opposes legalization of assisted suicide. A blog post by William Peace linked to the group's Web site refers to the film *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), which depicts an assisted suicide: "I am sure when I saw the film *Million Dollar Baby* and the audience cheered when the main character, Maggie, was killed I doubt anyone clapping thought they were bigots. But I was shaken to the core—the assumption clearly was one is better off dead than disabled. What exactly does that mean about the quality of my life?" (n. pag.). But Jack's understanding of Auggie's disability doesn't end with "better dead than disabled." Through personal acquaintance, Jack realizes that a life with a disability is well worth living, even if the disability has profound repercussions. The novel supports the idea that August has a good life by giving him a happy, ordinary, and intact family of origin, with a dog, a sister, a mom and dad, and lots of laughter. Via's boyfriend and her ex-best friend both testify to the appeal of the Pullman family. Justin says, "i like olivia's family. they laugh a lot," and "olivia's family tell each other 'i love you' all the time." (192) Miranda says, "I loved her mom and dad. They were always so welcoming and nice to me. I knew they loved their kids more than anything. I always felt safe around them: safer than anywhere else in the world" (241).

The changing fortunes of Jack and Auggie's friendship speak volumes about *Wonder's* distinctive portrayal of disability. *Wonder* is in the business of not

only portraying ableism but also the process of overcoming it. A comparison with a very similar novel, Sharon M. Draper's *Out of My Mind* (2010), may prove helpful. *Out of My Mind* has also spent many weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list ("Best Sellers: Children's Middle Grade"). Like *Wonder*, *Out of My Mind* is a middle grade school story about a kid with an obvious disability (in this case, cerebral palsy) who enters mainstream fifth grade for the first time. Also like *Wonder*, *Out of My Mind* offers strong challenges to ableism. Like August, the novel's main character, Melody, is excited about making an able-bodied friend, Rose, at school. Melody experiences a similar rejection to August's, and uses her talking computer to call out Rose and her whole fifth grade class for their ableism. The difference between the novels is that Melody's rejection happens three pages before the end of *Out of My Mind*, while August's rejection happens on page 77 of Palacio's 313-page book. On Halloween, Jack—and the entire school—are still at the beginning of their transformation into a supportive disability community.

The next phase of Jack's transformation begins when he finally realizes why Auggie has stopped being friends with him. That transformation involves a symbolic undoing of the monster model of disability. Startled by an unexpected homework assignment, Jack's mind runs through a stream of pop-culture images of shock and surprise—from the kid in *Home Alone* to melting ghost faces, and finally to the Bleeding Scream—then realizes that Auggie was the kid under the Bleeding Scream mask who overheard his conversation with Julian (152). This rescreening of popular imagery allows Jack to get beyond the monster model and reach out for forgiveness from the boy under the mask.

Jack cements his renewed friendship with Auggie by changing "better dead than disabled" into "better dead than mean," transferring social death to Julian the bully. In a storm of apologetic text messages, Jack writes to Auggie: "I would want 2 kill myself if I were Julian :)." Cruelty is the real disability. As Shakespeare wrote in *Twelfth Night*, "In nature there's no blemish but the mind; / None can be call'd deformed but the unkind" (3.2.361–62). This insight lies at the heart of the social model of disability. The monster model, however, continues to trouble August's existence until the novel's climax, when it is finally overturned, and August has his finest moment of stare management. Auggie and Jack are on a school camping trip when they encounter some older kids, from another school, in the dark woods. A flashlight illuminates Auggie's face, and a girl screams. In a series of taunts, the older boys run through the usual litany of pop-culture monsters: Gollum, *Alien*, orc. August discovers how hateful and violent the monster model can become: "The look of total horror on the girl's face when she first saw me. The way the kid with the flashlight, Eddie, looked at me as he talked to me, like he hated me" (274). Jack steps forward to defend August, and Eddie knocks Jack down. August responds with quick thinking and courage. It's hard to believe this is the same boy who started the year with his eyes to the ground and his tongue silent.

“Look,” I said, stepping in front of Jack and holding my hands up in the air like a traffic cop. “We’re a lot smaller than you guys . . .”
“Are you talking to me, Freddie Krueger? I don’t think you want to mess with me, you ugly freak,” said Eddie. And this was the point where I knew I should run away as fast as I could, but Jack was still on the ground and I wasn’t about to leave him. (266)

Surprisingly, Julian’s friends come to the rescue of August and Jack, and they admire August’s strength of character. The story goes around the school and gets bigger and bigger each time it is told, but

no matter who was telling it, two things always stayed the same: I got picked on because of my face and Jack defended me, and those guys—Amos, Henry, and Miles—protected me. And now that they’d protected me, I was different to them. It was like I was one of them . . . These big dudes I barely even knew before would knuckle-punch me in the hallways now. (282)

August’s community gets both bigger and better. As disability activist Eli Clare writes: “I am looking for friends and allies, for communities where the gawking, gaping, staring finally turns to something else, something true to the bone” (261). While the story of the boys in the woods may be turning into a tall tale, it still contains an element of true friendship.

The novel ends with a quiet moment between August and his mother. They are walking home to have ice cream and cake after the triumph of August’s standing ovation at the middle school graduation ceremony. They are accompanied by his whole inner circle: his extended family, his sister’s friends, Jack and Summer and their families. His mother whispers, “You really are a wonder, Auggie. You are a wonder” (310).

Over the course of the novel, R. J. Palacio remakes all the meanings of the word “wonder.” In the monster model of disability, August is a wonder in the antiquated sense of an oddity who provokes staring. In the medical model of disability, August jokes, “I don’t want to brag or anything, but I’m actually considered something of a medical wonder, you know” (130). In the social model of disability, wonder signifies the discoveries of Jack, Summer, and the other students as they grapple with disability for the first time. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes: “Mastery closes down knowledge; wonder opens up toward new knowledge” (51). Lastly, August is a wonder in the sense his mother means it: a kid loved and appreciated for being himself. August is wonderful “[f]or coming into our lives. For being you” (310).

Wonder is in many ways a fairy tale, with a fairy-tale happy ending. The novel even invokes the fairy-tale figure of the monster. However, it does so to work a counter- spell, turning the monster back into an ordinary boy.

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