

Drawing (on) Disability

Chris Foss, Jonathan W. Gray, and Zach Whalen, eds. 2016. *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. 216 pp. ISBN 978-1-349-69898-1.

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Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives, edited by Chris Foss, Jonathan W. Gray, and Zach Whalen, collects twelve essays that explore the intersections between comics and disability, representing a wide spectrum of disabilities and their representations in comics. However, it is surprising to find that a volume this concerned with diversity offers studies that are almost exclusively about American comics, with only one chapter dedicated to manga. A broader scope could have, perhaps, encompassed more varied perspectives and thus helped avoid what certainly amounts to a misleading title for this American-centric volume. Despite these shortcomings, the studies under consideration offer readings of various (and variously represented) disabilities that are both approachable and engaging.

In “Mutable Articulations: Disability Rhetorics and the Comics Medium”, Jay Dolmage and Dale Jacobs place comics theory in dialogue with disability theory, with the aim of exploring how the multimodal comic book form “represents and creates non-normative transformations of body and mind” and how disability studies can employ these characteristics of the medium in the development of new “disability rhetorics” (16). The authors focus on *Dumb* (2018), an autobiographical comics series by Georgia Webber about the author’s loss of voice and slow recovery. By examining how Webber uses the multimodality of the medium, its serial nature, and the physicality of the comic book as an object, Dolmage and Jacobs show that *Dumb* creates innovative chronological and spatial techniques that position the disability narrative beyond the conventional medical mode in which it is usually framed, instead commenting on such notions as the splitting of identity, reclaiming of agency, imperfection of all discourse, and the placement of disability within the wider spheres of culture, gender, and sexuality.

“When you have no voice, you don’t exist??: Envisioning Disability in David Small’s *Stitches*” by Christina Maria Koch provides a reading of another memoir about loss of speech. Koch shows how David Small’s *Stitches* (2009) illustrates the connection between disability and “the social norms and constraints of embodiment” (30) through the aspect of visibility, thus foregrounding the social context of the disability the protagonist struggled with in childhood and adolescence. Koch’s reading demonstrates how Small explores his disability through the concepts of visibility, invisibility, and “hypervisibility” (31), all of which draw attention to the importance of the gaze (and especially the medical gaze) directed at the body of the disabled person and the possibility of resistance through a counter-gaze or staring back. The visual aesthetics and page layouts of *Stitches* are analysed within this framework of visual communication and the politics of staring, with special emphasis on the embodied self as enmeshed in the social and cultural context.

Todd A. Comer’s “The Hidden Architecture of Disability: Chris Ware’s *Building Stories*” examines Ware’s mixed-media product (consisting of 14 objects, including a game board,

hardcover books, and comics in a variety of forms) as a work that draws the reader's attention to the physical aspect of interacting with a book, "and by doing so also reminds us of the body and the body's environment" (45). This emphasis on the body is reinforced through Ware's story of the life of a female amputee, and Comer's critique of Ware's approach as "ableist" focuses on the representation of the disabled body as a metaphor that brings together the fragments of *Building Stories* and enables them to function as a completed whole. Comer's analysis takes the reading of the disabled protagonist's body further, recognising within it a negative stereotype of disability: an embodiment of "loneliness, incompleteness, and the absencing space between humans" and "a metaphor for the loss and dissolution of all human endeavors" (54).

In "Standing Orders: Oracle, Disability, and Retconning", José Alaniz traces the transformations of the superhero character Barbara Gordon/Batgirl, from her able-bodied beginnings as part of the Batman family in the 1960s, through the years spent as Oracle, a wheelchair-using paraplegic who coordinated superhero activities using her computer knowledge, to her eventual "retconning" or, as Alaniz puts it, "de-disabling" in 2011, when the stories of certain superhero characters were reset back to an earlier point in their lives. The chapter first examines episodes from the Oracle years which focus on the representation of the day-to-day experiences of a newly disabled person in a wheelchair, following Barbara's evolution from self-blame and shame to a feeling of completeness and self-acceptance, as well as her new role as the supervising Oracle. Secondly, the chapter explores the company's decision to transform Oracle back into the able-bodied Batgirl and the polarising responses of fandom to this change, with some embracing the reversal of the sexist double standard they recognised in Oracle's story (visible from the fact that only male characters in the comic-book universe received easy cures for similar disabilities, while Oracle did not) and others rejecting the retcon as a betrayal of an empowering figure, most prominently in a variety of online environments. Finally, Alaniz warns against such reversals of representations of disability, recognising within them the potential for compounding social myths about the disabled and even a "quasi-eugenicist model of disability" that aims at erasing physical and cognitive difference (74).

"Drawing Disability: Superman, Huntington's, and the Comic Form in *It's a Bird...*" by Mariah Crilley argues that comic books have long relied on a signifying system in which heroes are represented as whole and healthy, while villains are cast as ugly and, in some way, incomplete, thus relying on a process that alienates and stigmatises the disabled. In the hero of Superman, Crilley identifies a character who is at the forefront of "this signification, this able-bodied adoration" (82). Crilley's reading of *It's a Bird...* first focuses on those of its vignettes that employ Superman himself in subversions of the politics of staring, exposing his physical perfection to visual examination usually reserved for people with visible disabilities, subjecting Superman to the "dehumanizing gaze associated with disability" (85). Crilley argues that such an approach exposes the artificiality of able-bodiedness and simultaneously "enfreak[s] able-bodiedness" (85), emphasising Superman's own difference and outsider identity, his alienness, and his "hyper-able-bodiedness" (85), therefore actually subverting the ideology of able-bodiedness. The second part of the article focuses more on the protagonist of *It's a Bird...* and his struggle with reconciling Superman's "pure able-

bodiedness” (82) with his own hereditary potential for developing Huntington’s disease. Using examples of non-romanticised depictions of the disease in the comic, Crilley argues that the form is well suited for representations of the embodied, material experience of the disease, and, secondly, for an indictment of “the systems of able-bodiedness that capitalize on such physical difference” (92) as the one caused by Huntington’s disease, i.e., systems which posit perfect health as natural, and disability as deviant or abnormal.

In “Reading in Pictures: Re-visioning Autism and Literature through the Medium of Manga”, Chris Foss employs the approach of “speaking with” instead of “speaking for” people with autism “by putting autistic voices in dialogue with theoretical work on sequential art” (97). Foss proposes that the medium of manga, unlike more traditional narrative forms, offers a framework that is better suited for representing the lived experience of autism due to its less linear presentation, its exploitation of various dimensions of sound (internal and external) as an important aspect of the visual experience of manga, and its overall emphasis on multimodality through a multisensorial experience. By relying on testimonies from people with autism and using several examples from manga, Foss shows how such texts reflect the autistic experience of sensory overload by simultaneously incorporating image, movement, and sound (including the dimension of silence), as well as how language is perceived from the autistic perspective in a way that is radically different from the more conventional understandings and usages of language.

“Graphic Violence in Word and Image: Reimagining Closure in *The Ride Together*” by Shannon Walters continues the topic of representation of autism. The author examines the tensions between word and image in Paul and Judy Karasik’s *The Ride Together* (which depicts the Karasiks’ confrontation with the possibility that their autistic elder brother was abused in his residential facility), illustrating how, in representations of cognitive disability, the topic of violence affects the interplay between words and images by frustrating their assumed harmony. Walters accomplishes this by focusing on how the fact that the Karasiks’ brother refuses to disclose whether or not he was abused introduces an uncertainty that “shows possibilities for questioning normative assumptions regarding the combination of word and image in comics and for interrogating the neurotypical foundations of closure” (114). In other words, the authors’ inability to find a “normative or neurotypical closure” (122) due to David’s refusal to speak of the potential abuse leads them to reimagine closure in more open-ended, uncertain terms by incorporating their brother’s autistic perspective in its depiction.

Jonathan W. Gray’s “‘Why Couldn’t You Let Me Die?’: Cyborg, Social Death, and Narratives of Black Disability” explores Cyborg’s various struggles with identity, from his navigation between options available to him as a black youth to his transformation into a superhero with a disability. Gray’s reading identifies the depiction of Cyborg’s perception of his “triply othered” (126) existence (black, post-human, and disabled) as variously problematic, both in Cyborg’s perspective towards his race and towards his disability, noting that his behaviour “reinforces the notion that a tragic accident that leaves one disabled also necessarily destroys one’s sense of self” (134). Gray shows how, despite Cyborg’s promotion from the Teen Titans to the famous Justice League, Cyborg still retains his goal of reverting

to an able-bodied existence “rather than achieving a kind of techno-organic apotheosis” (136). Despite the possibility that this is in part due to what Gray terms narrative stasis (certain character traits of a superhero often remain unchanged in order to ensure the serial publication of superhero comics), Gray points out the problematic fact that Cyborg’s “attitude toward his body, established in the early 1980s, is not permitted to change in order to better coincide with more current understandings of disability” (136), thus maintaining a pathologised perception of disability.

“You Only Need Three Senses for This’: The Disruptive Potentiality of Cyborg Helen Keller” by Laurie Ann Carlson examines the depiction of Helen Keller in *Helen Killer*, a series that reimagines her as a cyborg assassin and secret agent. By abandoning both the myth of “the ability to get past the lived reality of the body” and what Carlson sees as “the myth of Helen Keller” (141), the series provides a sexualised version of Keller in control of her narrative who avoids the dichotomy of independence versus dependence by realising her own “interdependence”. Carlson shows how the series disrupts the images and ideas of Keller as a passive student ingrained in our cultural memory in order to “explore Keller’s radical side within the comic form” (146). This exploration includes both a version of Keller that is “performing excessive feminine sexuality” (151) (and thus countering ideas of disabled people as asexual) and a disruption of the convention in stories about disabilities involving some form of rehabilitation of the deviance by depicting Keller coming to terms with her disability. Carlson argues that such a reconfiguration of ideas surrounding Helen Keller results in a cyborg identity that embraces and “enjoys the third space of interdependency” (151).

In “Crippling the Bat: Troubling Images of Batman”, Daniel Preston analyses depictions and resolutions of disability in two Batman stories: *Batman: Knightfall* and *Batman – Vampire*. Preston regards *Knightfall*’s “abbreviated narrative of healing” as problematic because, firstly, it relies on the idea that a complete restoration of health is necessary for Bruce Wayne to return to his role of Batman; secondly, it condenses or even discards the details of the process of healing; and thirdly, the story arc uses disability merely as a device to temporarily prevent Wayne from performing the duties of Batman, but without attempts to “truly investigate the complications that accompany the spinal cord injury he receives, nor the social impact that such an injury entails” (160). Preston’s reading of *Vampire*, which recounts Batman’s transformation into a vampire in an alternate universe, identifies a representation of psychological disability such as addiction in Batman’s bloodlust. Preston argues that by drawing a clear connection between Batman’s inner evil (his abandonment of a moral code) and his physical disfigurement, the story employs “outdated ideas of stigma” (164) that evoke the freak shows of the nineteenth century. However, he ultimately finds that *Vampire* offers more nuanced complexity in the depiction of living with a disability and incorporating it into everyday life.

“Breaking Up [at/with] Illness Narratives” by Kristen Gay examines how the emerging genre of illness-memoir comics highlights the need for alternative spaces within which it is possible to provide various ways of speaking about the experience of living with an illness (including subjective, professional, medical, and religious discourses). Gay posits that such

alternative spaces “resist totalizing discourse about illness (that is, medical)” and instead offer “subjective accounts that break up (at/with) ancient rhetorical tropes that call for certainty and coherence” (172). Gay outlines those rhetorical tropes, inherited from Aristotle and Augustine, which, on the one hand, reduced “a complex person’s identity to their diagnosis’s definition” (173) and relied “on a view of rhetoric that favors representation rather than individual experience” (174), and, on the other, the convention of the confessional genre of writing in a way that progresses from trauma/turmoil to recovery/healing. Gay analyses two examples of illness memoirs that turn away from these two traditions, first tracing how Ellen Forney’s *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me* “emphasizes the importance of maintaining a sense of one’s self in the midst of a diagnosis with an illness” (175) and then showing how Allie Brosh’s *Hyperbole and a Half: Unfortunate Situations, Flawed Coping Mechanisms, Mayhem, and Other Things that Happened* breaks “from narrative traditions that attempt to rationalize and resolve illness” (176).

“Thinking through Thea: Alison Bechdel’s Representations of Disability” by Margaret Galvan draws attention to the intersection between queerness and disability in the work of Alison Bechdel. Although scholarship on Bechdel’s *Fun Home* has already devoted ample attention to its depiction of queer identity, Galvan shows an underexplored perspective by highlighting the connection between Bechdel’s obsessive-compulsive disorder and her ruminations on her sexuality, especially when contrasted against that of her father’s own homosexuality. Galvan further juxtaposes Bechdel’s *Fun Home* with her *Dykes to Watch Out For*, exploring its “textual-visual theorizations of bodily and sexual diversity” (200) through the inclusion and gradual development of Thea, a disabled lesbian.

This collection of essays can undoubtedly serve as a useful entry into both the fields of disability studies in general and disability in comic books in particular. Despite the aforementioned narrow scope of the volume, limited as it is to mostly American comics, the essays manage to provide a variety of insights into genres ranging from personal memoir to superhero comics. By offering perspectives that invite a rethinking of both familiar figures such as Superman and Batman, and examinations of less well-known works of relative newcomers, the collection shows the wide applicability of disability studies that could be useful not only to scholars of comics books, but also to experts of children’s literature and visual arts.

Hlapićeve nove pustolovine

Smiljana Narančić Kovač, ur. 2019. Hlapić u bijelom svijetu. Zagreb: Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Učiteljski fakultet. 279 str. ISBN 978-953-8115-49-3.

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Zanimanje čitatelja i struke za roman *Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića* Ivane Brlić-Mažuranić ne jenjava ni više od sto godina nakon njegova izlaska. Dapače, posljednje desetljeće ili dva svjedočimo nizu interpretacijski izuzetno poticajnih studija koje taj roman čitaju na nov i svjež način, pokazujući time nevjerojatnu slojevitost djela koje bi se površnomu i neiskusnomu čitatelju moglo pričiniti kao jednostavno i značenjski pravocrtno, što je, kao