Ott, is often more compelling than a written narrative. The curator works to create a setting that can help transform pity or fear into an understanding of the lived experiences of individuals or groups.

Voice and authority must also be considered carefully. When Ott was working on a disability rights exhibit, she consulted with dozens of people about the script. Some of the activists with whom she spoke wanted an explicit narrative to address the oppression of disabled people; they felt an image or an object was insufficient to convey the historical weight of discrimination.

Ott concluded with a mention of her current project, on the history of polio. The shape the polio exhibit eventually takes will be the result of a delicate interaction among the constituents, the historical record, the funders, and the imaginative capacity the curators ascribe to the public who will view it. —RGF

Disability and Narrative

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AFTER A DECADE OF WORKING IN DISABILITY studies, I still find myself surprised by the presence of disability in narratives I had never considered to be "about" disability—in animated films from *Dumbo* to *Finding Nemo*; in literary texts from *Huckleberry Finn* to Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*; and, most curiously, even in the world of science fiction and superheroes, a world that turns out to be populated by blind Daredevils, mutant supercrips, and posthuman cyborgs of all kinds. Indeed, I now consider it plausible that the genre of science fiction is as obsessed with disability as it is with space travel and alien contact. Sometimes disability is simply underrecognized in familiar sci-fi narratives: ask Philip K. Dick fans about the importance of disability in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and you'll probably get blank stares. But the Voigt-Kampff empathy test by which the authorities distinguish humans from androids was, Dick tells us, actually developed after World War Terminus to identify "specials," people neurologically damaged by radioactive fallout, so that the state could prevent them from reproducing. That aspect of the novel's complication of the human-android distinction is lost in the film *Blade Runner*, but the film does give us an engineer with a disability that involves premature aging, which links him intimately to the androids who have life spans of only four years.

Or take *Gattaca*, which is not only about eugenics but also about passing as nondisabled. I use the term "passing" advisedly, because in *Gattaca* the relation between race and disability is one of mutual implication: unable to pursue a career in aeronautical engineering because of his genetic makeup, Vincent (Ethan Hawke) decides to become a "borrowed ladder," using the bodily fluids and effluvia of Jerome (Jude Law) to obtain the clearance necessary for employment at the aerospace firm, Gattaca. Jerome is a former

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world-class athlete who was struck by a car; permanently disabled and visually marked by the most common sign for physical disability, a wheelchair, he literally sells his genetic identity to Vincent. Interestingly, both the genetic counselor whom Vincent's parents consult and the personnel manager who conducts Vincent's first job interview are black: it is as if we have created a society obsessed by genetics and indifferent to race, and one of the film's better features is that it leaves *this* feature unremarked. *Gattaca* is not only a disability passing narrative; it is also, as I have argued elsewhere, the leading example of the science fiction employment-discrimination genre (Bérubé, "Disability").

There are also texts in which exceptionality—of all things—is rendered as disability. In the two *X-Men* films, for instance, the visual link is established by Professor Xavier's wheelchair, for Xavier is both a telepath and a paraplegic; but the *X-Men* films render mutant exceptionality as disability even when mutants discover their power to change their shape or to heal their wounds in seconds. Paradoxically, Xavier's school for "gifted" children serves as a safe haven for the disabled, sheltering teenagers who will be misunderstood and stigmatized by the world outside its walls. This linkage of exceptionality with disability may sound strange and to some readers even offensive, on the grounds that such an expansion of the dynamic of disability does violence to the materiality of disability. But this linkage is simply a reversal of the more familiar narrative dynamic in which disability is rendered as exceptionality and thereby redeemed—as when Dumbo finds that the source of his shame is actually the source of his power. This narrative "redemption" of disability is, however, slightly different from the *Rain Man* logic by which it turns out to be a good idea to bring your autistic brother to Las Vegas to count cards: for when you leave Vegas, your brother is still autistic, whereas in the rendering of disability as exceptionality, the disability itself effectively disappears. To take an example from contemporary television, Tony Shalhoub's obsessive-compulsive detective, Monk, shows us that OCD is a particularly good disability for a detective to have, raising the possibility that certain kinds of disability make one a more able participant in certain kinds of narrative—since detective fiction is almost always recursive, rewarding those characters in the narrative who are the most capable readers of the tropes of detective fiction.

A good deal of disability studies work in literature thus far has concentrated on the depiction of individual characters in narratives. This strand of disability studies has tended to focus on the representation of human bodies and to insist that Western literature of the past two millennia has often participated in the Christian tradition of reading disability as an index of morality—or, alternatively, as a sign of God's grace or of his wrath, of his capacity to heal the sick or to visit boils or leprosy on even his most devoted servants (Stiker). Even so anti-Christian a novel as Richard Wright's *Native Son*, for instance, renders disability metaphoric in such a way as to suggest that sightless eyes are a window on the soul—as in the unsavory moment in Boris Max's defense of Bigger Thomas at which he turns to the woman whose daughter Bigger has killed, crying, "And to Mrs. Dalton, I say: 'Your philanthropy was as tragically blind as your sightless eyes!'" (393).

Native Son deploys disability so as to render it a moral failing and manages, in so doing, to ignore the material detail of the disability itself: it may be crucial to the plot that Mrs. Dalton was not able to see Bigger in Mary's room that night, but once Mrs. Dalton has performed her function in the plot, her blindness is important to *Native Son* only in a metaphoric sense. A different but related operation is at work with characters like Tiny Tim or Boo Radley: their disabilities are not presented as indexes of their moral standing but they serve nonetheless as indexes of

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everyone else's moral standing, offering the other characters opportunities to demonstrate whatsoever they might do to the least of their brothers. One of the tasks undertaken by disability studies so far has been to point out these tropes and these characters, and to critique them for their failure to do justice to the actual lived experiences of people with disabilities. That project is long overdue and still needed; yet it sometimes proceeds as if characters in literary texts could be read simply as representations of real people.

At the risk of sounding polemical, I want to stress how counterintuitive this should be for literary critics. If there's one thing we're all trained to do, it's to read things in terms of other things—whether the "other things" be the deep structure of human thought, the workings of the unconscious, the inscription of gender difference, the determination of cultural forms by the material base, the contradiction between literal and rhetorical senses of language, the trace of hybridity, or the homo-hetero divide that has guided so much binary thought in the past century or so. It is altogether queer that disability studies might suggest that the literary representation of disability *not* be read as the site of the figural. And yet scholars in disability studies are right to point out that literary representations of people with disabilities often serve to mobilize pity or horror in a moral drama that has nothing to do with the actual experience of disability. A certain amount of literalism, even censorious literalism, seems to me acceptable in this regard; I am thinking partly of Irving Zola's famous line that never once, in the course of reading hundreds of novels about detectives with disabilities, did he come across a wheelchair user who said, "God dammit, how I hate stairs" (505), but more generally I am suggesting that it is all right for readers to object in simple terms to narratives or characters that use disability for pity or horror. Still, if you can imagine a version of the disability slogan "Nothing about us without us" that goes, "Nothing about us with us—if it turns out that we are being used as figures for something else," you may get some sense of how this aspect of disability studies might seem incompatible with the enterprise of professional literary study, dedicated as so much of it is to the interpretation of the figural. To put this even more simply: imagine a school of literary criticism that says, *Let the blind Mrs. Dalton simply be blind and not also the poster woman for the hypocrisy of white liberal philanthropists who are also white slumlords.* Or: *by all means interpret the white whale any way you want, but don't you dare take the bait Melville offers us when he suggests that Ahab's lost leg is an index of hubris or of original sin.*

Disability studies does not really constitute a New Literalism in literary study. It calls attention to the many figural uses of disability, but only to demonstrate that many of the narrative devices and rhetorical tropes we take for granted are grounded in the underrecognized and undertheorized facts of bodily difference. It does much more as well. Disability is not a static condition; it is a fluid and labile fact of embodiment, and as such it has complex relations to the conditions of narrative, because it compels us to understand embodiment in relation to temporality. In her classic essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey claimed that "sadism demands a story" (14); I'd like to suggest that sadism is not alone in demanding a story. As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have argued, "[I]t is the narrative of disability's very unknowability that consolidates the need to tell a story about it. Thus, in stories about characters with disabilities, an underlying issue is always whether the disability is the foundation of character itself" (6). Whether the disability in question is perceptible or imperceptible, a matter of a congenital illness or of a degenerative disease, an effect of aging or the object of the inconceivably rude query *How did you get that way?*, disability, too, demands a story—as it does in the case of Oedipus, from start to finish.

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I can illustrate this claim by way of a text in which disability is not rendered as metaphor and the narrative forgoes the question of how the character got that way: Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. I single it out not for any extraordinary virtues or vices but because I taught it four times before I noticed the dynamic I'm about to describe. Late in the book, our narrator, a bright young Chinese American woman very much like the young Kingston, writes of a man who comes to haunt the laundry in which she works with her family. Kingston refers to him as "a mentally retarded boy" who "had an enormous face" and "growled" (194). He gives toys to children: "'Where do you get the toys?' I asked. 'I . . . own . . . stores,' he roared, one word at a time, thick tongued." "Sometimes," Kingston writes, "he chased us—his fat arms out to the side; his fat fingers opening and closing; his legs stiff like Frankenstein's monster, like the mummy dragging its foot." And when he begins sitting in the laundry, our narrator begins to worry about her similiarities to him—and the possibility that her parents might want to marry her to him: "I didn't limp anymore; my parents would only figure that this zombie and I were a match. I studied hard, got straight A's, but nobody seemed to see that I was smart and had nothing in common with this monster, this birth defect" (195). His very existence, it seems, is a threat to the intelligence and self-possession of Kingston's narrator: "his lumpishness was sending out germs that would lower my IQ. His leechiness was drawing IQ points out of the back of my head" (196).

On the literal level, this is unsavory stuff—no less so for the fact that Kingston deliberately heightens her narrator's revulsion. However hyperbolic this revulsion may appear, it is grounded in a logic of abjection that will be all too familiar to anyone acquainted with the social stigma of mental disability. But it would be too literal-minded of me to stop here. I think, now that I have learned to reread *The Woman Warrior*, that this revulsion is crucial to the functioning of the narrative of the text, and not because this man is made to serve as a figure for something else but because he isn't. The narrator is disturbed by this man and disturbed all the more by the belief—unwarranted, as it turns out—that her parents are considering him as a potential son-in-law. But this disturbance takes place in a creative-nonfiction memoir that is replete with such characters: *The Woman Warrior* is, after all, justly celebrated as a text that stages and dramatizes the silencing of women under patriarchy, and some of those women, from No Name Aunt to Moon Orchid to Pee-A-Nah to the "village crazy lady . . . an inappropriate woman whom the people stoned" (92), are driven into incoherence and madness by the profound injustices that circumscribe their lives. As the narrator remarks not long before she introduces us to the mentally retarded man, "I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would be It at our house? Probably me" (189).

Clearly, the writer who fears becoming the crazy woman or the village idiot would be particularly threatened by the mentally retarded man who draws IQ points from the back of her head. And, indeed, literature has been fascinated by madness for some time, particularly in those historical periods in which the capacity for reason has been considered the measure of being human. But it's not madness that concerns me here; to steal a line from Roy Porter, "madness continues to exercise its magic, but mindlessness holds no mystique" (qtd. in D. Wright 93). Madness is narratable and can even generate its own forms of narrative. Mindlessness is another thing, for it speaks to the conditions of possibility of narrative itself. The mindless, after all, can give no account of themselves; they will never come back to themselves after their bout of madness has served its narrative function, as does King Lear's. They do not have the capacity to understand what has happened to

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Lear, just as they do not have the capacity to proclaim that nothing will come of nothing, or to understand the multiple ironies that ripple outward from that utterance. They haunt narrative, as Kingston's retarded man haunts the laundry and Kingston herself, with the insistence on a form of human embodiment that cannot narrate itself but can only be narrated. And they haunt all narrators with the possibility that perhaps the narrators too, someday, will be unable to tell a coherent story.

Mindedness is so obviously a necessary condition for self-representation and narration that it should be no surprise to find various depictions of damaged mindedness serving neither as moral barometers nor as invitations to pity or horror but as meditations on the possibility of narrative representation. One might think here of the way that the trope of short-term memory loss is used to comic effect in *Finding Nemo* or *Fifty First Dates* or to suspense-thriller effect in *Memento*; or of the way that varieties of artificial intelligence and human intelligence—in neuroscientists, novelists, people with Alzheimer's, and children with Down syndrome—weave the thread of the narrative of Richard Powers's *Galatea 2.2*. It is no coincidence that Kingston's narrator finally explodes at her mother, explaining and justifying herself—"I may be ugly and clumsy, but one thing I'm not, I'm not retarded" (201)—upon the entrance of the "mentally retarded boy" into the text. Earlier in the final section, she had tormented a younger girl mercilessly, trying to get her to speak, taunting her and calling her "stupid" (177), "dumb," and "a plant" (180). This scene then sets up the appearance of the boy, establishing a relation between mental retardation and speech, as if the fear of the former necessarily produces the latter, as if one begins to narrate partly to show—and to show to oneself—that one is neither crazy nor retarded.

In making this argument, I do not want to establish some kind of performance criterion for narrative: there is nothing normative about my rereading. I am not suggesting that all the characters in a narrative should in principle be able to narrate themselves and that any narrative involving characters who cannot narrate themselves is somehow exploitative. On the contrary, the dynamics of disability compel us to recognize that there will always be among us people who cannot represent themselves and must be represented. But the reason these dynamics should be of interest, with regard to aesthetic (rather than political) forms of representation, is that the relation of characters to their own narratives has been a concern for fiction from *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* to *The Counterfeiters* and (to draw on Richard Powers again) *Prisoner's Dilemma*. Such fictions entail the possibility that literary characters may be aware that they are being narrated and could in theory take over some of the functions of the narrative (as when Quixote rebukes Avellaneda's counterfeit Quixote). At the least, such fictions entail extremely complex relations between representation and what I'd like to call textual self-awareness. That textual self-awareness can be implicit, as it is when Chaucer's Merchant introduces into his tale a character, Justinus, who advises Januarie to attend to the tale of the Wife of Bath (1685–88), or explicit, as when Samuel Beckett concludes *Molloy* by writing, "Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (176). Either way, the text reveals itself as being to some degree aware of its mechanical operations and to some degree willing—so to speak—to revisit and revise the rules of its operating system. If my formulation threatens to anthropomorphize the text, it is only because textual self-awareness on this order is itself anthropomorphic inasmuch as it demonstrates a self-reflexive capacity akin to that of the human mind. Thus, because the textual representation of cognitive disability requires the depiction of minds that

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do not have this capacity for self-reflection, it can be read without too much difficulty as a device with which to explore and reflect on the cognitive capacities necessary for textual self-representation.

In an odd moment in the 1981 introduction to *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison argues that the question of textual self-representation is central to the idea of a democratic fiction:

> [H]ere it would seem that the interests of art and democracy converge, the development of conscious, articulate citizens being an established goal of this democratic society, and the creation of conscious, articulate characters being indispensable to the creation of resonant compositional centers through which an organic consistency can be achieved in the fashioning of fictional forms. (xx)

This is a strained argument, and I imagine that Ellison might have been aware of the strain: conscious, articulate citizens are to democracy as conscious, articulate characters are to *the creation of resonant compositional centers through which an organic consistency can be achieved in the fashioning of fictional forms*? By the time I get to "organic consistency," I'm lost. Still, I think it's worth calling attention to the difference between characters who function as do citizens in a representational democracy (that is, as characters who can in principle represent themselves) and characters who could never manage to do so partly because they do not understand narrative and who do not understand narrative because they do not understand certain categories of mind—namely, temporality and causality.

I return now to a couple of texts I mentioned above, and conclude with two more that foreground narrators with cognitive disabilities. In *Finding Nemo*, the very narrative of the film helps cure Dory's short-term memory loss. Her disability is comic in part because of her inability to understand the narrative she inhabits, but somehow, as she herself remarks, the longer she stays with Marlon in his search for his son, the better her memory becomes; it is as if the longer she remains in the narrative, the more of the narrative she can understand, and it turns out, appropriately enough, that her gradually enhanced memory is critical to the resolution of the plot. In *Memento*, by contrast, we might say that insofar as the narrative is controlled by the perspective of the character who has no short-term memory, the narrative itself is "disabled," in the relatively "neutral" way that a smoke detector or a function on one's computer can be disabled. That is to say, the narrative of *Memento* simply does not perform some of the functions we ordinarily associate with narrative (it cannot be reassembled into a "proper" order; *fabula* cannot be reconciled with *sujet*); on these grounds, it can be distinguished from superficially similar narratives in which events merely appear in reverse sequence, such as Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* or Don DeLillo's *Underworld*.

Mark Haddon's celebrated 2003 novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* flirts on every page with the possibility of becoming such a disabled narrative, "written" as it is by a fifteen-year-old boy with Asperger's syndrome who cannot read others' emotions and is easily overwhelmed by sensory input. The narrator, Christopher John Francis Boone, claims not to understand jokes (10) or metaphors (19–20) and insists that he does not have an imagination: "Other people have pictures in their heads, too. But they are different because the pictures in my head are all pictures of things which really happened. But other people have pictures in their heads of things which aren't real and didn't happen" (98). He doesn't like "proper novels," he tells us, "because they are lies about things which didn't happen and they make me feel shaky and scared" (25). It would seem, then, that Christopher Boone has extremely limited resources as narrators go. But as it happens, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* is almost experimentalist in its capacity

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for self-reflection; there is even a passage in which Christopher remarks briefly on some of the things he is not narrating (24), a passage that marks the text's affinities with more recognizably experimental novels like Beckett's *Watt*. The novel repeatedly calls attention to its awareness of itself as a text: Christopher not only remarks on the text as he writes it, pointing out (in a footnote) when he is using a simile rather than a metaphor (22) and noting that he has engaged in "what is called a digression" (33); he also revisits and revises his narrative as he goes along, with the help of his special-needs teacher Siobhan, who oversees the text's production:

> And I realize that I told a lie in **Chapter 13** because I said, "I cannot tell jokes," because I do know 3 jokes that I can tell and I understand and one of them is about a cow, and Siobhan said I didn't have to go back and change what I wrote in **Chapter 13** because it doesn't matter because it is not a lie, just a *clarification*. (176–77)

Christopher also lets us know that it was Siobhan who initially suggested he write a narrative about the neighbor's dog he found stabbed with a garden fork at seven minutes after midnight: "'Well, we're supposed to be writing stories today, so why don't you write about finding Wellington and going to the police station.' And that is when I started writing this" (33). In a critical moment, the text is discovered by Christopher's father as Christopher is writing it, and Christopher cannot hide his earlier attempt to deceive his father: "Father interrupted me and said, 'Don't give me that bollocks, you little shit. You knew exactly what you were bloody doing. I've read the book, remember'" (102).

This metafictional attention to the production of the text, however, stems not from a Beckettian self-awareness about the potential for infinite regression involved in self-awareness but from a narrator's cognitive disability, rendered by Haddon as "realistically" as humanly possible (and without a whiff of pity or horror—or maudlin sentimentality). There are definite limits to *Curious Incident*'s textual self-awareness: though Haddon's readers may have cause for reflection on the phenomenon of Christopher's writing "I wondered how I would escape if I was in a story" (17), there is no question that Christopher himself believes that other fictional texts are fictional and that his is not. Christopher's disability also makes it exceptionally difficult for him to get to his mother's house in London by himself—and allows Haddon to remind his readers, step by painstaking narrative step, just how much mental work is involved in negotiating one's way through a train station, and how much mental work it takes simply to read a narrative for the mundane drama of what happens next. Still, the narrator of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* is what disability workers would call a "high-functioning" narrator, capable of understanding a great deal about the narratives he's read and the narrative he's in. Christopher Boone, in other words, is no Benjy Compson.

What, then, of *The Sound and the Fury*? In one sense, the narrative of Benjy's section is profoundly disabled, insofar as Benjy is incapable of providing the context that would make sense of narrative details he himself provides, like "the cows came jumping out of the barn," "I went away," or "the dark began to go in smooth bright shapes." For as first-time Faulkner readers have learned, to their surprise or dismay, the difficulty of Benjy's section does not stem from any Joycean linguistic pyrotechnics, dense webs of allusion, or philosophical complexity. Even the syntax and diction are simplicity itself:

> Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he

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> hit and the other hit. Then they went on, and I went along the fence. (3)

It would help here if Benjy used the words *golf*, *green*, and *tee*, but it would help even more if he could explain that there is now a golf course where his favorite section of the Compson pasture used to be. Because he cannot, his narrative is disabled, and it becomes surprisingly difficult to say precisely which of its narrative functions have been disabled. Most readers attribute their many Benjy difficulties to the section's forbidding temporal leaps, but these are only one feature of a narrative that manages to be arduous reading even when it's describing golf, Damuddy's death, or its own narrator's drunkenness. Indeed, we might just as plausibly claim that the temporal leaps, far from being barriers to reading, are evidence of Benjy's super narrative powers, as if he were a comic-book science fiction figure. For as many longtime Faulkner readers have known, Benjy's disability also manifests itself as an enhanced ability to make spatial and emotional associations across many years. Benjy seems to have a formidable memory; in that respect, he is an ideal narrator for a novel whose characters are obsessed with the past, and all the more ideal a narrator for an experimental narrative that attempts to create what Joseph Frank long ago called "spatial form." On the other hand, Benjy's strength as a narrator can be regarded as a diminution of his "humanity": he is a literary device—not in the sense that he symbolizes the decay of the Compsons or the decline of the old South (I never found the reductive and faintly eugenic allegorization of Benjy compelling) but insofar as he exists to enact a narrative technique that will enable the novel's later chapters to unfold their idiosyncratic relations to time in a more readily comprehensible fashion. On this reading, Benjy Compson is less a character than a narrative overture, establishing the novel's major tropes and Wordsworthian spots of time, and doing so all the more effectively for freeing his readers from the mundane question of what happens next.

One could be still more skeptical of the section. There is no question that *The Sound and the Fury* positions Benjy as the moral arbiter of the rest of the characters, who are to be measured by the standard of how they treat the least of the Compson brothers. There is even the possibility that in giving voice to Benjy, in according him the narrative of mental events that makes up what's usually called the "stream of consciousness," Faulkner is himself passing as disabled, attempting the literary equivalent of the well-known phenomenon in which talented screen actors (Sean Penn, Tom Hanks, Dustin Hoffman, Leonardo DiCaprio, Cuba Gooding, Jr.) expand their range and win the hearts of millions by portraying characters with cognitive disabilities. But I myself am not that skeptical of Faulkner's creation. Each time I reread it, I return to my first impressions on reading it when I was fourteen: shock and awe. When it comes to Benjy, I think Ellison has a case worth making: that Benjy's section enables a potential democratization of narrative representation, just as the expansion of autobiography to persons not ordinarily considered entitled to it represents a democratization of that genre. Certainly, no reader who understands Benjy's inarticulate consciousness participates in the desire to send him to Jackson; on the contrary, our admiration for Caddy is premised largely on her ability to read Benjy attentively. The fact that the workings of sympathy in the novel depend on the foregrounding of disability does not in itself make them suspect, because there is all the difference in the world between deploying cognitive disability as a threat to narrative self-consciousness and using it to explore narrative self-consciousness.

By "all the difference in the world," I mean to invoke not a global idea of difference that subsumes all other differences but an idea of difference that establishes the parameters of the world we can hope to live in.

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In one world, cognitive disability remains irreducibly alien, and self-representation depends on one's capacity to distinguish oneself from those incapable of self-representation; in another world, cognitive disability is part of a larger narrative that includes an indeterminable number of characters, only some of whom have the capacity to narrate but all of whom shed light on the mechanics of narrative and narration. Rereading narrative from the perspective of disability studies, then, leads us to reread the role of temporality, causality, and self-reflexivity in narrative and to reread the implications of characters' self-awareness, particularly in narratives whose textual self-awareness is predicated on the portrayal of cognitive disability. The point of learning to reread in this way is to try to learn what makes all reading and self-representation possible: it is a question literary texts cannot fail to address and to which literary scholars in disability studies will not fail to attend.

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