Introduction

Stories

Representations of disability are ubiquitous, far more prevalent and pervasive than (almost) anybody realizes. Not because of the truism that we all become disabled in one way or another if we live long enough, but because disability has a funny way of popping up everywhere without announcing itself *as* disability. Everyone knows Dumbo as the plucky little elephant who can fly; few people think of Dumbo as a child with a disability, even though his ridiculously large ears are, for most of the film, a source of stigma and shame—so much so that the other circus elephants torment Dumbo's mother into violent madness. (She is eventually deemed a danger to herself and to others, and incarcerated in a separate circus wagon.) Everyone knows that *Total Recall* (the original version) is a campy Paul Verhoeven gorefest featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger imploring Sharon Stone, "Less do eet—move to Maas"; few people realize that the film also features workers with employment-related disabilities—namely, the mutants on Mars whose mutations were caused by inadequate protection from solar radiation. And everyone knows that the X-Men are superheroes; to date, I am the only person I know who thinks that the first X-Men film, released in 2000, spent its first twenty minutes

establishing the premise that the X-Men are also gay, gifted Jewish kids with disabilities.[1]

None of these films is "about" disability in the sense that *My Left Foot* or *Rain Man* or *Away from Her* is about disability, and none of them uses the word. And, more important for my purposes in this book, none of the disabilities in these films—with the sole exception of Professor Xavier in his wheelchair—is remotely "realistic." If you were to object that (a) baby elephants actually don't come with ears so large that they constantly trip over them, or (b) Martian mutants don't really have stomachs that feature fetus-like growths with psychic powers, surely you would be missing the point. Likewise, if you were to object that the association of X-Men with disability is offensive on the grounds that actual people with disabilities cannot read minds, bend steel, or change shape, you would effectively be denying fiction one of its ancient prerogatives, that of making stuff up.

This book is about fictional disabilities. The disabilities in question are "fictional" not in the sense of the "disability masquerade" so brilliantly limned by Ellen Samuels in *Fantasies of Identification*, whereby nondisabled characters feign disability, but rather, in a sense that attends to the various *deployments* of disability in fiction. I say "deployments" (and I will use the ungainly term more than once) rather than "depictions" or "representations," because I will argue—no, I will *show*—that disability and ideas about disability can be and have been put to use in fictional narratives in ways that go far beyond any specific rendering of any disabled character or characters. Representations of disability are ubiquitous, yes, even or especially when you are not looking for them; but narrative *deployments* of disability do not confine themselves to representation. They can also be narrative strategies, devices for exploring vast domains of human thought, experience, and action. Over the course of the next three chapters, I will chart three such domains: motive,

time, and self-awareness. And as you read this book, I hope that you will find that disability is indeed ubiquitous and polysemous. But more than that, I hope that by the time you finish reading this book, the arguments in it will gradually have come to seem obvious to you, or that, in some as-yet-uninvented verb tense that combines the past imperfect with the future perfect, you will have realized that you were thinking these thoughts all along. And I hope that among those thoughts will be this: The various deployments of disability I analyze here, with nothing more than the tools of close reading, are also powerful meditations on what it means to be a social being, a sentient creature with an awareness of time, mortality, causality, and sentience itself.

* * *

I chose Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot* for my epigraph, my inscription over the gate to this book, because I think that his are words to live by, regardless of whether you are a professional literary critic. Narrative is important because it informs everything we think, do, plan, remember, and imagine. We tell stories—and we listen to stories, and we gauge the "well-formedness" of stories—within a couple of years of learning to walk and talk. That insight has been revisited in recent years by "evocritics," or "literary Darwinists," who argue not merely that we are hardwired for storytelling (which we may well be, if our children are any indication), but also that our capacity for storytelling has survival value—it is an *adaptation*, an evolutionary contrivance that somehow got us through the Pleistocene. I will take up the claims of the evocritics in my final chapter, reading them from the perspective of disability studies (as no one has done to date); for now, to open my discussion, I want to return to the premise of Brooks's *Reading for the Plot* for more humble, personal reasons.[2] I want to start by telling you about my kids.

My kids are no longer kids. One is in his late twenties, one in his early twenties; Nick, the firstborn, was a "gifted" child, capable of copying drawings of medieval European hill cities at the age of five; Jamie, his brother, has Down syndrome. Jamie also has an encyclopedic knowledge of sharks and the music of the Beatles, as well as an astonishing memory. Both of them are natural narrative theorists, though because of the differences in their capacities for abstraction, I wound up testing their narrative theories in different ways.

When Nick was a toddler, I was in my late twenties, and thoroughly uncertain how to do this "parenting" thing. I learned almost as soon as Nick could talk that he loved my stories; he even gave them numbers, though I never did learn his classification system. One of the stories, I admit, was designed for its perlocutionary effect: when my wife and I were graduate students, we could afford only half-day day care, beginning when Nick was two. So we worked out an arrangement whereby I picked Nick up from day care and took him for the afternoon three days a week, on the grounds that we were both writing our dissertations and needed to divide our time equally but I was a faster writer. I decided that for at least part of those afternoons, little Nick could accompany me to the University of Virginia's Alderman Library as I ran down my sources for what became the third chapter of my dissertation. And I decided that it would be a good idea to tell Nick the Story of the Day My Father Lost Me at the Queens Public Library. The hidden message? *Do not leave my side.*[3]

Nick liked stories with drama: the story of how the hockey-camp bus left without me in 1972; the story of how the camp counselor threw me out of the pool; the story of my first day in first grade, when the teacher corrected me for saying I was six when I was still only five (a situation that got worse in the following years, after that teacher decided to skip me into the second grade because of my reading skills). As you might imagine, sometimes Nick's appetite for sto-

ries became wearisome. I read to him every night, and I told him stories about people in my life, and I even made up some stuff. But one day when he was about three and a half, on a long car trip in the Midwest, he asked for story after story. And finally I decided to conduct a little experiment. "All right," I sighed. "I have a new story for you. It goes like this: Red. Yellow. Orange. Blue. Violet. Green. Black. Brown. White—"

"Dad!" Nick interjected, annoyed. "That is not a story."

"No?"

"No! It is just a bunch of colors."

"And a bunch of colors is not a story?"

"No! A story has to have things in it."

"Ah," I replied, phase one of the experiment complete. "A story has to have things in it. You are right. OK. Tree. Cloud. Sunshine. Water . . ."

"No, no, no," Nick insisted, more annoyed. "*Things happen* in a story."

"Fair enough," I acknowledged. "The tree blocked the cloud. The sunshine reflected off the water. The flowers grew . . ."

"Dad!!" Nick interrupted, even more annoyed. "That is not a story either."

"But things happen in it," I pointed out.

"But you are not telling why they happen."

Eureka. *In a story things have to happen for a reason.* We were very close, at this point, to E. M. Forster's famous dictum, "'The king died and then the queen died' is a story. 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief' is a plot" (60). As we will see in the following chapter, however, narratives such as Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* challenge the idea that things happen in stories, as does the opening of Beckett's *Murphy*: "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new" (1).

I realize there is some pathos in this story about stories: the poor beleaguered toddler, simply wanting to be entertained, subjected instead to the whims of his literary-critic father. But I was curious: how, really, did Nick understand the social contract underwriting "stories"? What did he understand as a violation of that contract, and why? Some years later, when he was seven, he picked up my copy of *The Sound and the Fury*. I invited him to read the first page or two, and that exchange became (in the fullness of time, more than twenty years later) the basis for the opening of chapter 2 of this book. Nick had no trouble at all with any of the sentences he read, and yet, after three or four paragraphs, he turned to me quizzically and asked, "What is going on here?"

"That," I had to admit, "is a very good question."

* * *

Jamie learned his alphabet before he started kindergarten at age six; he learned to read at a first-grade level by the time he was eight. Along the way, he somehow taught himself the American Sign Language alphabet and a few simple ASL words by imitating the pictures he saw in a Sesame Street book devoted to the subject. But even though Jamie had developed a profound love of sharks, barn animals, and the movie *Babe* (just like any number of children his age), he didn't really understand stories *as stories*. He had an amazing recall of individual scenes, particularly scenes that involved pratfalls, and he was able to repeat most of the dialogue from the exchange in which Ferdinand the Duck tells Babe the Pig why he wants Babe to go into Farmer Hoggett's house and steal the Hoggetts' alarm clock from the side of the bed. But he didn't understand how much of the movie's plot is predicated on that scene (the issue is whether animals can avoid being eaten by humans if they demonstrate that they are "indispensable," and Ferdinand has decided that he will crow like a rooster each

morning in order to stay alive), nor did he understand what it might mean for a plot to be "predicated on a scene" in the first place. Until he was ten, Jamie enjoyed narratives almost as if they were a series of entertaining vignettes.

Then in 2001, we took him to see *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. We feared that the film might be a bit too much for him to take in, from the opening scenes of Harry the Abject Orphan to the climactic sequence in which Voldemort's baleful spirit speaks from the back of Professor Quirrell's head, with all the plot miscues and misdirections along the way (most of which point to Snape rather than Quirrell as the malevolent force in Harry's world). But we were most pleasantly surprised to find that *he got it*—and not because he himself had glasses just like Harry's, not because he dreamed of going to Hogwarts himself. He roundly dismissed all comparisons between himself and Harry. Rather, he got it because he loved the story, and he loved talking about it for weeks, even after he'd seen the film three or four times. Impressed, I asked him if he'd like to read the book on which the film was based, and he responded with hand-rubbing glee.

Thus began his—and my—adventures with Rowling's plots, and Jamie's fascination with the intricacies of plotting. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* posed a challenge to him, because, as we learn during Harry's confrontation with Voldemort's younger self, Tom Riddle, most of the action in the novel is attributable to the fact that Voldemort has placed Harry's schoolmate Ginny Weasley under the "Imperius Curse," thereby forcing her to act as his puppet. The plot of the third installment, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, is still more demanding, because its denouement depends on a dizzying series of reversals in which we learn that the wizard suspected of numerous murders (as well as the betrayal of Harry's parents to Voldemort), Sirius Black, is entirely innocent, whereas the pet rat of Harry's close friend Ron Weasley, "Scabbers," is in fact the wiz-

ard Peter Pettigrew, who has been hiding out for thirteen years to evade capture for the crimes for which he had framed Black. Number four, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, introduces us to the internal machinations of the Ministry of Magic; we learn that there are rival factions within the ministry, and that a senior official's son was one of Voldemort's acolytes. Voldemort reappears in human form at the end of that narrative, thanks to the ministrations of ministry apparatchiks and the fugitive Peter Pettigrew, and thereby sets the stage for *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, which is devoted to the beginnings of a renewed civil war within the wizarding world. In the penultimate installment, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Hogwarts's sage headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, serves as Rowling's narratorial double as he walks Harry through his investigations into Tom Riddle's childhood, Riddle's obsession with genealogical purity, and his eventual transformation into Lord Voldemort.

It was astonishing to me that the vast legions of Rowling's readers now included my intellectually disabled child, a child who wasn't expected to be capable of following a plot more complicated than that of *Chicken Little*. And here's what was *really* stunning: Jamie remembered plot details over thousands of pages even though I read the books to him at night, just before he went to bed, six or seven pages at a time. Narrative has been a memory-enhancing device for some time now, ever since bards made a living by chanting family genealogies and cataloguing the ships that laid siege to Troy. But it took Jamie and me eight years to finish all seven novels of this young-adult Proust sequence, and Jamie retained plot details over all that time. This, I remember thinking, is just *ridiculous*.

As for me, I was charmed by Rowling's insistence that the world of magic is also a world of petty bureaucracy and qualifying exams, a world administered by a school in which brilliant professors are hounded from their jobs merely because they are werewolves, and

a world in which students experience the ineffable and the inexplicable while they engage in the routine business of scratching out essays—on parchment, with quills, no less—on the History of Magic and the intricacies of Herbology, Potions, Transfiguration, Charms, and the "soft" elective, Muggle Studies (which presents nonmagical peoples, "Muggles," from the Muggle point of view). Jamie was charmed by all of this, too, even if he didn't understand all the ironies involved in depicting the world of magic as a world like our own, in which witches and wizards are more likely to cite the statutes of the Department of International Magical Cooperation or the proper standards for cauldron thickness than a passage from *The Tempest*. But time after time after time, he bolted upright in bed, exclaiming, "So *that's* why Ginny Weasley was opening the Chamber of Secrets!" and "Wait a minute, Sirius Black is *innocent*!" And every time Jamie had an epiphany about Rowling's plots, I knew that he'd had an epiphany about narrative.

Sirius Black's innocence is no trivial matter. As his story unfolds and as later volumes make increasingly explicit, we learn an Important Life Lesson—namely, that the people in charge are often capricious, clueless, and cruel. Jamie could have been horrified by this, but he wasn't. Instead, he began to ask about things like "innocence" and "justice." So Martha Nussbaum, in *Poetic Justice*, gets at this critical question by way of Charles Dickens, and Jamie Bérubé gets at it by way of J. K. Rowling—so what? One's a prolific novelist who writes tripledeckers packed with plot twists and idiosyncratic characters, and the other is a pop-cultural phenomenon with an enthusiastic American readership and a line of products—*A Christmas Carol* chief among them—that has spawned all manner of spin-offs and tie-ins. Both are seductive tale-tellers, and both have had their snooty detractors.

One aspect of Rowling's work has led Jamie to wonder just what it means to be autonomous, though he doesn't use that word. The

Imperius Curse is bad enough, but when you're faced with dark wizards who falsely claim that they followed Voldemort only because they were under the Imperius spell, you've got a conundrum on your hands. The comic version of this conundrum (Rowling tends to explore justice and autonomy by way of comic subplots as well) is provided by the compulsive overachiever Hermione Granger, who takes it into her head to form the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare (S.P.E.W.) in order to free the house-elves from their lives of ceaseless service to wealthy wizard families. Hermione refuses to acknowledge, however, that the house-elves believe that their lives of ceaseless service are right and just, and that Hermione's attempts to "free" them are a profound insult. The house-elves thereby pose substantial questions: What does it mean to be acting under one's own power? How is one to know when one is not acting in one's best interest? Is "happiness" a sufficient criterion for determining an individual's quality of life (here as in *Brave New World*, with its endless supply of soma), or should something less subjective, like "flourishing," be preferred instead?

A critical index of Jamie's increasing sophistication as a reader was that he became increasingly capable of (and delighted by) making thematic connections that enrich his understanding of his other favorite narratives. In the course of our reading of *Half-Blood Prince*, we came upon an extended flashback/exposition in which the young Professor Dumbledore visits eleven-year-old Tom Riddle in the orphanage in order to inform him that he is a wizard and extend him an invitation to Hogwarts. Jamie gasped at Tom's arrogant reaction to Dumbledore's invitation, and, despite his fatigue, stayed awake for another couple of pages. But before we got to that point, I read the following passage: "The orphans, Harry saw, were all wearing the same kind of grayish tunic. They looked reasonably well-cared for, but there was no denying that this was a grim place in which to grow up" (268). I decided to say a few words about the orphan-

age, and about Harry's odd, complex moment of sympathy for the friendless boy who grows up to become Voldemort. "Did Harry have a happy childhood when he was growing up?" I asked. Jamie shook his head no. "He had the Dursleys," he said. I pointed out that Harry and Voldemort are similar in that they grow up without parents, and that the kids in the orphanages are there because they have no parents either. I added that Jamie might remember the orphanage in the film *Like Mike*, which was in the "heavy rotation" section of Jamie's DVD collection for a while.

"Or *Free Willy*," Jamie suggested. "Yes, that's right," I said with some surprise. "*Free Willy* is also about a kid who is growing up without parents, and who has foster parents, and he has trouble getting used to his new home."

"Or *Rookie of the Year*," Jamie said. "Not exactly," I replied. "In *Rookie of the Year* Henry has his mother, but his mother's boyfriend is a creep, and we don't know where his father went before he was born."

"*Star Wars* too. There's Luke," Jamie said. "Good one! *Great* example!" I cried. Perfect, in fact. *Star Wars* is like a class reunion of the West's major mythological motifs.

"*Mrs. Doubtfire*," Jamie offered. "Nope, that's about parents who are divorced and live in different houses," I said. "But still, in *Mrs. Doubtfire* the father misses his kids and wants to see them, so he dresses up as a nanny."

"What about *Babe*?" Jamie asked.

"Oh yes, that's a very good example," I told him. "*Babe* has no parents, and that's why he is so happy when Fly agrees to be like his mother."

"And Rex is like his father," Jamie added. "And Ferdinand the duck is like his brother."

Why, yes, Ferdinand *is* like his brother. This had never occurred to me before. But who knew that Jamie was thinking, all this time, about

the family configurations in these movies? And who knew that Jamie knew that so many unhappy families, human and pig, are alike?

Jamie and I have revisited *Babe* many times since: he now understands the plot, and we've talked often about whether it is right and just to eat animals, indispensable or otherwise. Jamie isn't giving up his sausage and bacon, by any means, but he now asks where all his food comes from and how it is made. Thus does the analysis of one narrative produce an endless series of cascading and overlapping narratives. Of course, Jamie is not the first person to remark that many compelling narratives, from Moses to Romulus and Remus to *Great Expectations*, from Harry Potter to Luke Skywalker to Bruce Wayne, involve the stories of abject yet powerful orphans. But I'm simply glad that he's in on the conversation. For our species' long-running obsession with narratives about orphans is, in part, the sign of our inability to stop wondering about our beginnings, and about the narrative problem of how to begin; likewise, as Frank Kermode argued in *The Sense of an Ending*, we tell stories partly because we know we are going to die. So it makes every kind of sense that in reading and rereading the saga of Harry Potter, Jamie has become more articulate about his own origins (as a "baby," a "toddler," and a "kid," matching each of these terms to specific eras, like 1993–1995 for "toddler") and more capable of understanding death—the deaths of characters, of family friends, and of his grandparents. The difference between Jamie's mute bewilderment at the death of his maternal grandfather in 2004 and his somber acceptance of my mother's death in 2013 (when he was emotionally mature enough to visit her in her final days, banter with her, and feed her some "smashed" potatoes) is not simply a function of time; it is also a function of narrative, and of Jamie's understanding of the parameters of narrative.

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But my children, adept narrative theorists though they be, are not my only inspiration for this book. This project is also informed by years of conversations with colleagues in disability studies, my 2013 seminar on narrative and intellectual disability at the School for Criticism and Theory, and two wholly unexpected encounters that subtly but decisively widened the parameters of this study.

The first encounter happened at the 2011 Modern Language Association convention in Los Angeles, and in retrospect is merely amusing—though at the time it seemed like the stuff of professors' anxiety dreams. I was on a panel titled "Narrative and Intellectual Disability," chaired by Rachel Adams. Since that was the working title of this project as of 2011, I thought it would make sense to try to spell out my ideas for this book, and return to matters I had not taken up since the 2004 MLA conference on disability studies hosted by Emory University. Additionally, I was horribly overdue on my contribution to the *Blackwell Companion to American Literary Studies*, and was hoping that writing the MLA paper would get me jump-started on the article. I titled my paper "Disabled Narrative," and traces of it survive in this book. I was trying to get at the question of how narrative irony works when it involves a character with an intellectual disability, a character who is rendered explicitly as someone who is incapable of understanding the story he or she inhabits. I noted that Steinbeck marks Lennie in this way from *Of Mice and Men*'s opening scene:

Lennie looked timidly over to him. "George?"

"Yeah, what ya want?"

"Where we goin', George?"

The little man jerked down the brim of his hat and scowled over at Lennie. "So you forgot that awready, did you? I gotta tell you again, do I? Jesus Christ, you're a crazy bastard."

"I forgot," Lennie said softly. "I tried not to forget. Honest to God I did, George." (4)

And just as Lennie does not understand where he is going or why, so too will he not understand what is going to happen to him in the book's final pages; in that sense, his intellectual disability provides the structure for the narrative irony, and the narrative irony defines the novel. Lennie knows not what he does, and we know he knows not what he does. But I mentioned *Of Mice and Men* only in passing, opening instead with Benjy Compson of *The Sound and the Fury* and proceeding to a comparison between Elizabeth Moon's *Speed of Dark* and Mark Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (this was one reason I was having trouble framing this argument for a volume on *American* literature), because—as I will show in chapter 3—Haddon provides an ingenious (and quite moving) solution to the problem of writing a novel in the voice of a character who (initially) does not understand the narrative he is in, whereas Moon has to skirt that problem by giving us a second level of narrative focalized through characters who do not have autism and who can explain what is at stake in the unfolding of the narrative told by the character who does have autism.

At the last minute, one of my fellow panelists had to pull out of the convention, and Rachel Adams informed us that Rob Spirko would substitute instead, with a paper titled "The Human Spectrum: Human Fiction and Autism." Rob preceded me on the program—and proceeded to deliver a paper about *The Speed of Dark* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, making many of the points and citing many of the passages I had hoped to highlight in my paper. As I listened to Rob, I toyed with the idea of taking the podium and saying simply, "My paper is what Rob said," but just then, he made an offhand reference to the "*Rashomon*-like" narra-

tive sequence in Philip K. Dick's *Martian Time-Slip*. I snapped to attention: this seemed to me to be something worth discussing. I had not written anything about *Martian Time-Slip* in my paper, but I had recently read it and was still trying to figure out what to make of its extraordinary strangeness. And I was thrilled to be able to discuss it at a conference with Rob Spirko, who has worked on disability and science fiction for some time.

I did wind up delivering most of my original paper; Rob's arguments and mine did not overlap completely. But I threw in some extemporaneous remarks about how the narrative sequences in chapters 10 and 11 of *Martian Time-Slip* are not, in fact, *Rashomon*-like. If they were, they would involve four characters telling the same story from drastically different perspectives, narrating significantly different sequences of events, such that the very idea of "the same story" becomes untenable. But they don't. Instead, as I will show in detail in chapter 2, they open by telling the same story almost word for word, and then proceed into disturbing fantasias that cannot be attributed to any one character, even though each character, the following day, feels the aftereffects of the sequence as a whole. The sequence is not merely "about" the perspective of a character with an intellectual disability; it renders intellectual disability in the form of a disabled textuality that cannot be attributed simply to any one character's mental operations.

And when I realized *that*, thanks to the casual remark of a last-minute-replacement speaker giving a fifteen-minute paper at the MLA convention, I realized that I had a critical piece of my argument, a way of talking about intellectual disability and narrative that did not begin and end with the discussion of whether X character has Y disability. I have often remarked, in the intervening years, that I am writing this book simply as a way of getting more people to read *Martian Time-Slip*. It would be a worthy goal in itself.

As for the second encounter: to say that it was "wholly unexpected," as I have done, is actually an understatement. It was pretty much the last thing in the world I might have imagined. It involved a whimsical decision to join Facebook (after years of steadfast, principled resistance) and, relatedly, to go to the fortieth anniversary reunion of my sixth-grade class (not a happy place for me when I was ten, but I thought that the details of tween angst of 1972 were not worth recalling in 2012). My former classmates, it turns out, have a Facebook page "dedicated to all the members of that class who endured and survived the 6th grade at the hands of the mercurial Mrs. Policastro." Etta Policastro was legendary, not just in the school but in the entire district. She was fierce; she was a martinet; she wore the standard-issue Permanent Hair Bun; and she stopped just this side of corporal punishment. And I was one of her two favorite students.

Within a few days of joining Facebook, I was hailed by Mrs. Policastro's other favorite student, one Phyllis Anderson, née Phyllis Eisenson—someone I had not thought about in almost forty years. It was quite clear who Mrs. P's favorites were: she kept a chart on the wall of all the books we had read (Phyllis led, I was second), and late in the year, after our citywide reading and math scores came back, she *announced to the class* that Phyllis and I had scored at the twelfth-grade reading level. This surely endeared us to our peers, as did Mrs. P's decision to cast me and Phyllis as the leads in the French play. (One of my male classmates resented this arrangement so much that he kept a tally of how many mistakes I made in each rehearsal, and over the months of rehearsals never failed to share this information with me. Another passed a note to Phyllis and signed my name to it. Moloch only knows what it said. Such were the details of tween angst in 1972.) For all that, Phyllis and I never spoke a word to each other, at least not in English. I simply assumed that she had her own circle of friends, and I was astonished to learn, forty years later, that her only

friend in the class moved away that year, and that she had made a list of New Year's resolutions for 1972 that included the determination *to ignore the class teasers.*

OK, I thought, so that's what sixth grade was like: you've got two shy, bookish kids who feel ostracized by their peers, who then become the very visible favorites of the teacher everyone fears and despises. That's not merely the basis for a friendship. That's the basis for an entire after-school TV movie. And in the course of striking up a conversation with this person forty years after graduation from PS 32 Queens, I happened to mention Madeleine L'Engle's novel *A Wrinkle in Time*, about which I had just been reading; 2012 was the fiftieth anniversary of the book's publication, and in 1972 at least half of our cohort had read it. Phyllis was of course (or so I imagined) Meg Murry, the very smart girl with the long hair and prominent glasses. This rudimentary identification was complicated a bit by the fact that *I* identified more with Meg—with her sense of isolation, helplessness, and vulnerability above all—than with any male character in the book, and by the fact that I did not stop to think that I might be inadvertently saying to my former classmate, "I remember you—you were the girl with glasses and what's more, everybody thought you were a weirdo." Which is kind of a rude thing to say to someone you've never spoken to, especially after forty years.

But in the course of that brief Facebook conversation, as we caught up on partners and kids and professions (literature professor, clinical psychologist), I mentioned that I was sitting at a table across from Jamie, who had just handed me a list of twenty-five kinds of sharks. To which Phyllis replied, "I am sure you did not know that my brother is autistic." Well, I could have plotzed. Needless to say, I did not know that; I did not know anything about this person, starting with the fact that she had a brother. And a brother with autism, in the 1960s (Andy Eisenson was born in 1957). *Oh my goodness*, I thought

at once, *what that must have meant for her mother—to have a child with autism at the precise historical moment when autism was being attributed to "refrigerator mothers." How difficult that must have been.* Followed almost immediately by, *Oh goodness, and then along comes this very smart girl, the younger sister. I can't even begin to imagine the family dynamics, except that no, wait, yes I can.* And the story quickly went still deeper: Sylvia Eisenson, Phyllis's mother, was in fact a psychologist in the New York City school system. She was A.B.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, of all places, where I taught for twelve years. She knew very well what Bruno Bettelheim was doing with Leo Kanner's refrigerator-mothers theory, and had actually written to Bettelheim to tell him that his work was destructive to loving parents. She received a reply from an underling, telling her to get therapy.

All this I learned in the course of one Facebook chat, which somehow went from "Oh yes, I remember you" to serious familial and emotional matters in the course of a few minutes. Life in the disability community can be like that; I remember a conference at which someone introduced herself as the parent of a child with Down syndrome and we wound up talking about our then-teenaged sons' desires for friends, especially girlfriends, within ten minutes. Because there is so much shared terrain, casual conversations can suddenly turn into serious discussions of special needs trusts and the ethics of getting your child or sibling to sign over his power of attorney. And then, a few days later, after Phyllis had gone back to look at her copy of *A Wrinkle in Time,* she wrote:

> just read the first chapter of "Wrinkle", and Meg is described with her glasses and braces and general awkwardness. And I thought—that is at least partly why I liked this book so much—there I am, though with-

out the spunk to duke it out with the kid who said something mean about my brother.

When I read that note I had yet another *Oy, what did I say* moment: *Oh yes, I remember you with your glasses and braces and general awkwardness?* (It turns out the braces came later. I did not remember any braces.) But it was the second sentence that grabbed me. No doubt young Phyllis Eisenson, or anyone with a sibling with an intellectual disability, would read *Wrinkle* with that inflection, with a sense of protectiveness for the more vulnerable family member: wasn't this one of the lessons we learned in Reader-Response Criticism 101?

From one angle it is a rudimentary point, a truism: of course we all bring to every text the welter of experiences, associations, encounters, and intertextual relations we have accumulated over the years. Reader-response criticism made much of this rudimentary point for much of the 1970s, with earnest *Critical Inquiry* forums on whether readers or texts make meaning, whether meaning is determinate or indeterminate, and whether the hypothetical "Eskimo reading" of Faulkner's "Rose for Emily" can be ruled out of court.[4] But from another angle, this exchange seemed (and seems) to me to open onto a principle of considerable breadth, one that has not yet been considered by literary criticism influenced by disability studies. It is the complement to the Rob Spirko-induced insight that disability in literary texts need not be located in, or tied to, a specific character with an identifiable disability; it is the Phyllis Eisenson-induced insight that disability in the relation between text and reader *need not involve any character with disabilities at all.* It can involve *ideas about* disability, and ideas about the stigma associated with disability, regardless of whether any specific character can be pegged with a specific diagnosis. This opens the field of criticism considerably; and I am going to

insist that this is a good thing, not least because I am determined to cure disability studies of its habit of diagnosing fictional characters.

To begin with, this insight serves as an essential corrective to Ato Quayson's framing of "aesthetic nervousness" in terms of the encounter between disabled and nondisabled characters. For my sixth-grade classmate (and, I suspect, for many people like her), relations between disabled and nondisabled *people* were at stake in the opening pages of *A Wrinkle in Time*, even though the novel itself contains no characters with intellectual disabilities in a family chock full of geniuses. (And I hope, also, that my remarks on *Wrinkle* will help put to rest—or at least demonstrate the superfluity of—recent speculations that Charles Wallace Murry is himself on the autism spectrum.)[5] My argument throughout this book is that even as disability studies has established itself in the humanities in a way that was unthinkable twenty years ago, it has still limited itself to too narrow a range of options when it comes to literary criticism; and though I am (obviously) being facetious about the idea of "curing" disability studies of anything, I am quite serious about the conviction that disability studies limits itself unnecessarily, as a new branch of criticism and theory, whenever it confines itself to determining the disability status of individual characters. Disability studies need not and should not predicate its existence as a practice of criticism by reading a literary text in one hand and the DSM-5 in the other, even when a text explicitly announces that one or more of its characters is (for example) on the autism spectrum. It is not that a character's condition is irrelevant to how we read him or her; rather, we should avoid the temptation to think that a diagnosis "solves" the text somehow, in the manner of those "psychological" interpretations of yesteryear that explain *Hamlet* by surmising that the prince is, unbeknownst to himself, gay.

I bring up that silly interpretive option for *Hamlet* because, as we will see in the following chapter, the revelation that Albus Dumb-

ledore is gay (an insight vouchsafed to us by no less an authority than the author herself) has helped to obscure the role of intellectual disability in determining the course of young Dumbledore's career: here, the realization that *character X has Y disability* stands in place of the more productive realization that *character X does Y because of Z*. But there is more at stake in the Eisenson-induced insight, I think. In opening the question of the potential relations between disabled and nondisabled characters (and readers' potential relations *to* those relations) so as to include characters who are merely presumed to be intellectually disabled by their fellow characters (such as Coetzee's Michael K and Friday), we come to recognize intellectual disability not only as the expression of somatic/neurological conditions but as a trope, a critical and underacknowledged thread in the social fabric, a device for exploring the phenomenon of human sociality as such. This is not merely a matter of remarking that the idiot and the holy fool offer strategic insight into human hierarchies and the contingency of systems of value, though it is partly that; it is also a matter of gauging how literary works depict systems of sociality in part by including characters who either are or are presumed by their fellow characters to be constitutively incapable of understanding or abiding by the social systems by which their worlds operate. As Margaret Atwood's unnamed narrator/protagonist in *Surfacing* bluntly declares, "Being socially retarded is like being mentally retarded, it arouses in others disgust and pity and the desire to torment and reform" (69). Though there is much more to it than that.

The idea that intellectual disability might provide the grounds for a literary examination of "human sociality as such," when combined with the idea that our species is made up of natural-born storytellers, is what leads me to engage with the recent branch of literary criticism known variously as "evocriticism" or "literary Darwinism." In my conclusion, I will argue (among other things) that this branch of

criticism is so aggressively invested in the reinstatement of a norma-tive conception of the human—indeed, an "evolutionarily grounded" normative conception—that it has nothing interesting to say about disability as a form of human variation (and nothing very interest-ing to say about individual literary texts). But one of the evocritics, Blakey Vermeule, has hit upon a fascinating possibility for literary disability studies—paradoxically, by taking one of the most problem-atic and undertheorized accounts of intellectual disability (in this case, autism) at face value. I will pursue that possibility briefly here, because it will help set the stage for the chapters to follow.

In her 2010 book, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?*, Vermeule starts from a most unpromising place: with Simon Baron-Cohen's theory of autism as "mindblindness," a theory that has been enormously influential among cognitive psychologists but has next to no credibility among many people in the autism community. (As we will see later, it is a theory that informs both Mark Haddon's *Curi-ous Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and the first edition of Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction*.) The idea is that people with autism are "mindblind"—that is, they are incapable of understanding that other people have minds of their own. The empirical/experimental basis for the theory is astonishingly thin: it is called the "Sally-Anne test," and it involves a scenario in which (a) Sally puts an object under a cup, (b) Sally leaves the room, (c) Anne takes the object or puts it under another cup, and (d) Sally returns to the room. The subject is then asked, *Where will Sally look for the object?*, and if the subject is incapable of understanding that Sally is unaware of what Anne has done, the subject is mindblind. The experiment is problematic on its face, as a diagnostic for autism; but for now, I want to suggest that Vermeule does something very strange with it, and in the course of doing so, renders the concept useful to disability studies.

In a chapter devoted chiefly to satire (and its relevance to cogni-tive psychology, which I will set to one side), Vermeule introduces the notion of "situational mind blindness." In an obvious sense, this is a severe misprision of Baron-Cohen's theory, since mindblind-ness is not a state one can occupy situationally, much less adopt at will. To make matters worse, Vermeule's discussion is punctuated by remarks such as "Mind blindness is undoubtedly a tragedy for au-tistics and their families, although some autistics seem to be gifted with heightened visual capacities" (196) and "People who lack mind-reading capacities somehow give us greater insight into our own capacities to dehumanize other people" (198). The proper response to this, in brief, would be something like "People who attribute mindblindness to others give us greater insight into their capaci-ties to dehumanize other people." Interestingly, Vermeule herself comes close to this formulation when she writes, "Situational mind blindness is a trope of dehumanization, albeit a very complex one: the point of it is to deny other people the perspective of rational agency by turning them into animals, machines, or anything with-out a mind" (195). Again, I have to leave much to the side here—this time, the supposition that animals do not have minds. And because Vermeule adopts Baron-Cohen's theory wholesale, it does not occur to her to suspect that *the attribution of mindblindness is itself a trope of dehumanization*.

However, the idea that mindblindness might be strategically attributed—not to people with autism, here, but to any object of co-medic or satiric ridicule (Vermeule considers the trope to be espe-cially useful for, if not constitutive of, satire)—is an insight that leads us away from the actual (diagnosable) attributes of literary charac-ters and toward an understanding of how tropes of stigma and de-humanization might work even in literary texts in which there are

no identifiable characters with disabilities. Even more productively, Vermeule's reading of *What Maisie Knew*, earlier in her book, suggests that mindblindness "is a way of acknowledging the social order by opting out of it" (97); in Maisie's case, this entails encouraging her hideous parents to believe that she is intellectually disabled (she is, in other words, playing dumb) so that she will not have to participate in their destructive forms of gamesmanship. "Becoming stupid is Maisie's revenge, her turn of the screw," Vermeule writes. "She opts out of *la ronde* simply because she refuses to be a tool in someone else's hands" (98).

Now we are getting somewhere. The attribution of mindblindness, on the one hand, and a character's strategic adoption of mindblindness, on the other, open onto complex readings of the social text regardless of whether any individual character can be definitively tagged as a person with an intellectual disability, and (even better) regardless of whether the theory of mindblindness has any utility for the understanding of the autism spectrum. Indeed, both strategic and situational mindblindness can be at work even in texts where the character in question is widely suspected (both by his or her fellow characters and by legions of readers) of having an intellectual disability: witness Coetzee's Michael K imagining that he can opt out of the brutal social order of martial law and omnipresent checkpoints: "If I look very stupid, he thought, perhaps they will let me through" (40). Even for Michael K, with his harelip and his slow mind, the adoption of strategic mindblindness is not simply a question of character attributes. It is a question of characters' relations to social systems, and hence to sociality as such. To return to where this train of thought started, from a Facebook chat with a former grade-school classmate, this is why it does not matter whether Charles Wallace Murry is a child on the autism spectrum. What matters is the web of social rela-

tions that constitutes other people's responses to Charles Wallace, and that intensifies to Meg's fierce, protective love of him.

* * *

Part of what I am attempting here can be aligned with Tobin Siebers's project in *Disability Aesthetics* and Joseph N. Straus's work in *Extraordinary Measures*. To wit, I hope to offer rigorous formal textual analyses informed by the past two decades of work in disability studies, and yet to broaden the purview of literary disability studies so that the field is not confined to the representation of human bodies and minds in literary texts. This is a bit tricky (as we will see in the following pages), because in all but the most exceptional cases, literary texts engage with issues surrounding physical and intellectual disability by representing human bodies and minds. What else would we be talking about but bodies and minds, if the subject is disability? And yet disability is also, always already, a social relation, involving beliefs and social practices that structure the apprehension of disability—and of putative human "norms." That is why Siebers can apply the insights of disability studies to architecture, urban studies, and city planning, as when he reads Detroit by way of the legacy of American "ugly laws"; that is why Straus can apply the insights of disability studies to modernist experimental music, in a move that draws heavily on Siebers's insight that modernist experimentalism has everything to do with the exploration of disability and nonnormative modes of being human. (That, in turn, is an insight shared and inspired—in a different register, as Siebers notes—by the Nazi curators who put together the "degenerate art" exhibition of 1937 and who promoted an aggressively idealized visual repertoire for the depiction of the human form.) Admittedly, Straus tends to ground his readings of modernist experimentalism in the individual conditions of composers' bodies,

as when he suggests that "the fragmented musical surface of [Stravinsky's] *Requiem Canticles*, with its discrete, isolated textual blocks, may be heard as a metaphorical recreation of physical disintegration, of a body fracturing and losing its organic wholeness" largely because "these late-style characteristics may be related to the increasingly difficult physical circumstances of Stravinsky's old age" (87). But the reading of the work as a "metaphorical recreation" of disability in no way depends on whether its composer was infirm or capable of running marathons; the formalist reading affords us insight into the operation of, and the violation of, human social norms that construct our sense of what is right and proper, what is in just proportion and in good working order.

It may be objected here that Siebers's and Straus's work, in extending disability studies beyond the readings of individual bodies and minds, depends more on ideas about physical disability than on ideas about intellectual disability. This is a point I will readily grant, not only with regard to Siebers and Straus but with regard to the following chapter on motive. There is no reason why the idea of disability as narrative "motive" should be confined to intellectual disability; physical disability is deployed as a motive device in countless narratives. The classic example (in disability studies) is *Moby-Dick*, where Ahab's disfigurement is the motive for his determination to turn the voyage of the *Pequod* into something other than your ordinary profit-generating whaling expedition. But examples abound everywhere, especially in speculative fiction, as when George Saunders's "flaweds" in the novella *Bounty* (including the narrator, who has claws in place of feet) try to avoid capture and removal to the Western United States, where they will be enslaved; or as when the leaders of Earth, in C. S. Friedman's *This Alien Shore*, shut down the portals that enable interstellar travel once they learn that traveling at speeds greater than light induces startling genetic mutations. (There is a savvy narrative

wrinkle in *This Alien Shore*, however, insofar as the mutants who do eventually learn how to navigate the "ainniq"—the wormholes in space—are marked as intellectually disabled in ways that suggest that they are on the autism spectrum. Not that their specific diagnosis is important; what matters is their narrative function.)

Nevertheless, I stress intellectual disability here for a number of reasons. The first is the simplest: the formal experiments and textual effects I explore in the second and third chapters, dealing with time and self-awareness, are predicated precisely on fictional forms of intellectual disability. Physical disability seems not to implicate features of mind so readily as intellectual disability; though physical disability may involve trauma and other complex psychological and psychoanalytic processes, it does not entail the kind of metacognitive meditations on cognition that I examine here. Another reason has to do with disability hierarchy, and the unfortunate but persistent fact that intellectual disability is more readily and widely deployed as a device of dehumanization than is physical disability; its ramifications for understanding the social, and understanding the social text woven into the literary text, are therefore all the more illuminating.[6] And the last reason has to do with the hierarchy within disability studies itself, which has been challenged in recent years (chiefly by people working on autism and on mental illness)[7] but which remains very much in effect, whereby physical disability stands in for disability *in toto*. The foundational works in the field, like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies*, were quite explicit about this, and indeed much of the disability rights movement (and the fundamental "social model" distinction between impairment, a matter of bodies, and disability, a matter of social relations and built environments) was launched from the (much-needed) perspective of people with physical disabilities.[8] But the foregrounding of physical disability has proven remarkably resilient even when it is not warranted, as evi-

denced by (to take one prominent example) the many criticisms of the television series *Glee* that took the show to task for featuring a nondisabled actor playing a wheelchair user, criticisms that largely overlooked the fact that the show also features a young woman with Down syndrome portraying a young woman with Down syndrome.⁹ This is not to say that the critiques of the show's use of Kevin McHale, the actor playing Artie in a wheelchair, were not warranted; they were, especially with regard to the episode titled "Wheels," in which Artie (a) remarks that he cannot fake his disability, and (b) takes part in a wheelchair dance to Ike and Tina Turner's version of "Proud Mary" that bears no relation to the choreography actually employed by wheelchair dance companies. And it is not to say that the show's portrayal of Becky Jackson, played by Lauren Potter, is beyond criticism as a representation of a young woman with Down syndrome. It is merely to say that the day is (or should be) long past when work in disability studies can allow physical disability to stand in for disability in general, while leaving intellectual disability unmarked and unremarked.

At the same time, I will leave it to others to decide whether the operative term here should be "developmental disability" or "cognitive disability" (or some other variant) rather than "intellectual disability." I have heard numerous arguments in all directions, as is common in the disability community; I remember when the phrase "person with Down syndrome" was to be preferred to "Down syndrome person," on the grounds that the terminology should be "people first"—until some people decided that "people first" terminology had the unfortunate effect of suggesting that a "person with Down syndrome" has Down syndrome and nothing else. I remember when the word "neuroatypical" was to be preferred to references to "autists," "autistics," or "people with autism"—until some people decided that "neuroatypical" had the unfortunate effect of suggesting that everyone

who is not on the autism spectrum is neurotypical (which is palpably not the case). So if some people prefer *developmental* or *cognitive* (or some other variant) to *intellectual* disability, I invite them to use those terms in their own work, in the understanding that no terminological choices are beyond criticism. Likewise, as to "disability": I remember the conference session at which someone criticized my use of the term "cognitive disability," not because he objected to the term "cognitive" but because he objected to the term "disability," which, he insisted, should be replaced by "difference." The title of the conference? "Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy." If a speaker's use of the term "disability" is objectionable at a conference expressly devoted to cognitive disability, then all our words are the wrong ones. We will have to find a new language in which to express our need for a new language.

As for my emphasis on the "fictional" nature of the intellectual disabilities I examine here: I am relying on the ancient—and yet always critical—insight that literary characters are not real people. Even when we are talking about literary characters with disabilities (or to whom disabilities can be or have been attributed), we are still not talking about real people. We are talking about fictional people with fictional disabilities—some of whom are presented, in various novels, in terms of their relation to narrative. The fact that the fictional disabilities under study here are intellectual disabilities just makes them all the more appropriate and provocative for the study of fiction. My methodology is formalist throughout, shuttling between plot and technique, content and form, *fabula* (the raw material of a story, arranged in linear temporal order) and *szujet* (the manner in which a story is told), even while acknowledging that none of those oppositions can be maintained in any pure form.

My last prefatory note, then, has to do with the texts I have chosen for this study. Nothing about this project—not even the endless

and unavoidable disputes over disability terminology—has given me more anxiety than this. I have mentioned that the idea for this book first took presentable form in my paper for the MLA conference on disability studies in 2004. That paper was occasioned by a rereading of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, a rereading that has mostly survived my re-rereadings of the past decade and more. But I soon found myself overwhelmed with possible examples; the phenomenon I observed at work in *The Woman Warrior* suddenly seemed to appear everywhere, in different guises. And the phenomenon itself became more complex the more I looked at it: where first I saw the deployment of intellectual disability as a motive for storytelling in the text, I soon realized that that deployment also had implications for the text's metafictional relation to itself. The question before me was no longer just a question of women driven mad by forms of patriarchy (important though that be), but also a question of a text's struggle, so to speak, to find its narrative relation to characters who became increasingly unable to understand narrative. This train of thought, wending its way through the following years, led me eventually to *Don Quixote*; and yet by the time I felt prepared to give public presentations on intellectual disability and self-awareness in *Don Quixote*, I was met with the question of whether my reading of the *Quixote* didn't also have potential resonance for readings of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. (Short answer: yes it does. And that is why *Pale Fire* appears in chapter 3.) My initial forays into disability and speculative fiction produced the same result: if I am arguing that disability is central to films like *Total Recall* and *The X-Men*, what do I think of *This Alien Shore*? Or the role of precogs in the fiction of Philip K. Dick? Or Octavia Butler's monumental *Xenogenesis* trilogy? Or Theodore Sturgeon's very weird and unsettling *More Than Human*?[10]

This book is evidence, I hope, that I took those questions seriously, even when I eventually decided, in the cases of Butler and Sturgeon,

to leave the work to others (and there is a growing body of terrific work on Butler and disability). But at a certain point I had to put aside my example anxiety and write. This book, as a result, is not comprehensive; it makes no claim to be *A Rhetoric of Intellectual Disability in Fiction*. It may be better, I have decided, to write a short and sharp book, delineating a few of the most important and engaging uses of intellectual disability in fiction, than to attempt the encyclopedic. If these arguments prove persuasive, perhaps they will generate an endless series of cascading and overlapping readings, some of which will inevitably point to the many oversights and missed opportunities I am unable to prevent or anticipate—and some of which might help to suggest that the phenomena I describe here are not idiosyncratic, not limited to a small handful of texts from among the world's vast stores of narratives, but, as I suggested at the outset, ubiquitous.