What writers did next: Disability, illness and cure in books in the second half of the 20th century

Lois Keith
Conservatoire of Dance and Drama, London
E-mail: loiskeith@globalnet.co.uk

This paper is an edited version of Chapter 7 of Lois Keith's *Take Up Thy Bed and Walk: Death, Disability and Cure in Classic Fiction for Girls* published by The Woman's Press whose kind permission to reproduce extracts is gratefully acknowledged.

For Victorian and Edwardian writers there was no such category as "books about disabled children". There were books that included children who were ill, blind or unable to walk, but the purpose of the story was never to show the kind of life a disabled child might live. The idea that these writers were perpetuating a view about people with a real life impairment, suggesting that such a life was hardly worth living, would probably have astonished them. Their aim was largely didactic and within the framework of warm and affectionate family stories, young readers were learning lessons on how to overcome selfishness or a too strong-will, and how to conform to traditional roles and gender expectations. In such a context, disability and illness were mostly used as metaphors, devices to bring the story through a period of trial or desolation into the bright light of resolution and happy ending.

In the second half of the 20th century, writers still aimed to teach young readers important lessons, but what they wanted them to learn was different. Books became less religious, less sentimental, less about being "good" in the sense of refined and unselfish and were more likely to be social and psychological explorations of the situations young people might face. The significant advances in medical treatment meant that people born with impairments were less likely to die in childhood and could expect a full and rewarding life. Disabled children were less often hidden away in institutions, and the growing civil rights movement of disabled people taught that defining disabled people in terms of their medical conditions was limited, and that we needed to consider the ways in which attitudes and prejudice serve to disable others. One might have expected to see these changes in society reflected in books for children, but this is not always the case. Writers attempting to portray disabled characters with conviction and make the reader aware of some of...
the "problems" they face have often been limited by their own narrow view and lack of any real understanding of what it is like to be disabled. This has produced some rather joyless books with confusing messages. As Baskin and Harris noted in 1977, "Social perception of disability is ambiguous, motivated by compassion and hostile forces, understanding and misunderstanding, curiosity and aversion. That the representations of these perceptions in literature should be paradoxical is not surprising".

Another problem is that although writers who include young disabled people in their stories almost always want to go beyond the tragic or evil, there is often a surprising lack of research and attention to detail, resulting in sometimes quite startling inaccuracies in these stories. Characters who lose a leg in an accident are somehow up and walking on their own within a week. (Voight, 1986) Others, portrayed as independent wheelchair users, capable of racing around the street to save the day with the power of their own arms, nevertheless have to rely on the school bully to push them to the nearest classroom (Ashton, 1994) or get someone to help them put their knickers on (Sallis, 1985). This adds to the confusion and lack of satisfying resolution in the modern tale.

In this sense the books of the 19th century often had more integrity than some more recent titles. Susan Coolidge (What Katy Did, 1872) and her fellow writers were clear from the beginning that they wanted to show their female characters how to behave and when they had learned this lesson they could be cured. Modern writers aim for greater realism, but sometimes still find it hard to imagine what kind of life there can be for someone who cannot walk.

By the time we reached the late 1960's and '70's, there was a new kind of realism in children's books. Topics once considered too sophisticated, emotionally upsetting or demanding were now deemed appropriate for young readers. There was a new climate which made it possible for writers to explore complicated, less easy to resolve subjects like divorce, death, bullying, racism, sex and disability which it was harder to resolve with a simple, sentimental ending.

Although the death of a major character was unusual in books for young people, where the character was disabled it remained a surprisingly popular option. Sweet Frannie (1981) and No Time At All (1994) both by Susan Sallis, and See Ya Simon (1993) by David Hill are examples of stories where a character who uses a wheelchair is dead by the end of the book. All these titles use the technique of having some of the story "dictated" by a friend, reflecting on the life of the disabled character and the good times they had together. It is interesting to think about whether these stories reflect reality -- some disabled children do, of course, have life threatening conditions -- or the inability of the writer to imagine a happy, full life as a grown up disabled person.

Writers have always used the concept of the "outsider"; the character who for one reason or another is on the edge of society. Post 1970, the outsider became a very popular literary device, particularly in novels aimed at adolescent readers. The teenager with divorcing parents, the one who has been ill-treated by adults, the black teenager (for some writers being black was in itself a "problem" category), the one painfully exploring their sexuality, offered the possibility of a complex social and psychological exploration of the journey a difficult or troubled character had to make in order to achieve some kind of reconciliation within herself or himself and with others.

A disabled character would appear to be a classic "outsider" and theoretically at least, this offers many possibilities to the writer. A disabled teenager might well have reasons for feeling lonely, not part of the crowd, subject to other people's judgements and prejudices. But the role of "outsider" in the novel relies on the character being at the centre of the story with their views seen as valid, and their journey the one with which the reader most identifies. Too often in fiction, the
disabled character is the "outsider": not the protagonist taking the difficult path towards inclusion, but in a secondary and marginal role. In many of the "outsider" novels of the 1960's and '70's that include a disabled teenager, the central, troubled character is not the one in the wheelchair. Their role is merely to be the vehicle in which the non-disabled protagonist travels in order to become a happier and better person.

This trend gave rise to a phenomenon that Pat Thomson (1992) has dubbed "second fiddle books":

There is still a tendency for a book with a disabled character in it to be a 'problem' book, and there is an infuriating genre which might be deemed a 'second fiddle' book. In these, there is indeed a disabled character but they exist only to promote the personal development of the main, able-bodied character. Thus Samantha becomes a better person through having known someone in a wheelchair. Bully for Samantha but what about the person in the wheelchair? (p. 24)

Susan Sallis' *An Open Mind* (1978) is a good example of a "second fiddle" book. The story is told through David who is disturbed and unhappy about his father's impending marriage and life in general. Although the novel includes the hopes and fears of Mark, a boy with cerebral palsy, (referred to throughout the novel as "spastic"), it is David's voice and views that are central. Sallis uses the school project, a popular plot device in the "second fiddle" novel. The "school project", usually social studies or "citizenship", is a device by which the central character, sometimes troubled and difficult (male), sometimes worthy and charitable (female) goes off to a "special school" or day centre, meets a disabled person, learns to be a bit more humble and goes back to school a better, wiser person. In *An Open Mind*, David's project takes him to the special school where he meets Bruce, the son of his father's new girlfriend.

Bruce is the brave long-suffering type, patient and cheerful, never complaining. When Dave tells him about his proposed trip to the country, he observes that Bruce "never hinted at feeling -- well, deprived, before, and he didn't really this time. It was just so obvious he couldn't rough it in some cottage like we were going to do."

But in the name of realism, Bruce is not allowed merely to be cheerful and long-suffering in the mould of Charles Dickens' Tiny Tim. In the second half of the story, he feels guilty and wretched at the thought that his mother will not marry the man she loves because she doesn't want Dave's dad to be "Lumbered with -- with -- with a ! In the end, we are told that everyone who knows Bruce really does care for him and loves him as he is, but Bruce himself fades out of the picture. Under the pretence of a "modern" treatment of this subject, Sallis follows the traditional plot device of using the ill or disabled character as a catalyst for change in the protagonist. As in novels of the previous century, Bruce's role, like Beth March in *Little Women* and Helen Temple in *Jane Eyre* is to bring out the good in others. But at the ending of the book, it is Dave's, not Bruce's sense of himself that is the issue. It is Dave who has developed into a more feeling kind of person, one who realises that people are the most important thing in his life.

Michael Coleman's *Going Straight* (2003) is a more recent example of the disabled child as "project".

*Sweet Frannie* by Susan Sallis (1981) was very well received when it was published and for at least the next ten years it was presented as a new, positive way of describing the lives of young disabled people in fiction. It was praised for its "lack of sentimentality and use of the contemporary idiom" (Pinsent, 1997, pg. 127) and for the characterisation of a paraplegic 16 year old girl who is assertive, rebellious and "bubbling over with life". (Quicke, 1985, pg. 108).

Sallis uses a number of conventional devices from an earlier era of children's fiction. Fran is an orphan, abandoned by her mother on the steps of the Social
fiction. Fran is an orphan, abandoned by her mother on the steps of the Social Security Office "without a name or pedigree or legs that worked". The book starts with Fran's "coming home" but unlike Pollyanna or Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, Fran is not seeking the love and acceptance of a frosty maiden aunt. Instead, she is starting a new life at Thornton Hall a residential home for disabled people; the not-so-modern equivalent of the Victorian orphanage. It is written in a sharp edged, first person narrative. Fran does not like being patronised or pushed around. Sallis wants to give us an attractive and lively character who is proud of her independence and her beautiful hands and arms. But she constantly contradicts herself by insisting on Frannie's hatred of her "heavy and useless legs". At one point, she bizarrely suggests that these might have been replaced with "tin ones" if it hadn't been for Frannie's weak heart, as if artificial legs could walk on their own without the need of nerves, muscles and messages from spinal cord to brain.

Part of Frannie's self hatred at her body is her disgust at her incontinence, about which Sallis seems positively obsessed. We first meet this on page 10 when Frannie describes herself as coarse because she is always wetting her knickers and then again on pages 16, 23, 42, 44, 57, 68, 111, 118, 123 and 138! Despite interpretations of the book that have seen the portrayal of Frannie's sexuality as positive and unusual, Sallis constantly contradicts this view. Frannie loves being kissed by another resident of Thornton Hall, the handsome Luke Hawkins, but when her doctor suggests Luke is not as committed to her as she is to him, indeed would never have fallen for her if "his legs were still there" she retorts. "Maybe I should just let him touch me up a bit? After all I couldn't feel a thing and if he could get his hand through my plastic pants and the sani pads it might just give him a bit of a thrill!" She has a "pulsating, beating, body " but inexplicably "love play" and "the French kiss" can never be for her because she has "no feeling below hip level."

Since we know from the beginning that Fran's "days are numbered" because of a heart complaint which seems to have no connection with her paraplegia, (as in Victorian novels, no medical condition is specified) the reader is not asked to think about what kind of life this feisty, attractive young disabled woman might have ahead of her. Her spirited nature is also complicated by the disgust or pity she feels for the other occupants of Thornton. When she looks at the some of the other girls in the home she thinks, "I knew these were attractive girls but my mind wouldn't get past those frightful hands fastened almost straight onto their shoulders". She seems to love Luke because he is not really "one of them". True, he has had his legs amputated following a car crash, but with Fran's help in shaking him out of his depression and isolation he will soon be out of that wheelchair and walking on two legs, albeit artificial ones. About this Fran is insistent. "You've got to Hawkins! You must walk again! How the hell can you carry me over the threshold if you can't walk!"

The story ends with a warped 1980's version of the "miracle cure" scenes of earlier books. Luke, still in his wheelchair, returns from his parent's home to Thornton Hall to comfort Frannie after the death of a foster aunt. Outside her room he turns to face her.

'Watch this Fanny.'

I watched.

He took the rug from his waist. He wore jeans and at the end of the jeans were black shoes. Slowly, smiling at me, he leaned down and pushed his left shoe over to his right and tucked the step of his chair out of the way. Then he knocked his left leg to the ground and followed it with his right. He sat up and placed his hands on the arms of his chair. Then he shoved. A grunt came from him and he stopped smiling, but he was up. He was standing free of the chair. He had no sticks, no crutches. He was free. Hawkins was free.

Miraculously, he lifts Frannie and carries her over the threshold.
The final section is in Luke's voice telling us that Frannie has died. Although Sallis clearly wanted the reader to see her as a strong, spirited, independent girl, it is impossible not to see her death as the price that has had to be paid for the redemption of another. Her death has allowed handsome, sensitive Luke to become free of the burden of a life with her. Presumably he will continue to love and miss her, but we assume he will soon be walking his way into a new relationship with a girl who can walk and does not wet her pants.

Like many other books dealing with impairment, Sallis suggests that an enlightened way to look at disabled people is to "see the person not the disability" or, as she says in the novel "see Frances Adamson not a paraplegic". Acceptance in these terms means accepting the person despite their impairment. The real self, the one that matters, can never incorporate the braces, crutches or wheelchair. The real "you" is the one within, the spirit rather than the corporal body. There is no perception of physical difference as integral to the person and not to be hidden or ignored.

See Ya Simon by David Hill (1992) is set in Australia and is another book where the disabled character is dead by the end of the story, but at least the Simon of the title is not tortured by self-loathing; instead he is funny, sharp and alarming. Near the beginning of the story his friend Nathan tells us, "Simon's my best friend and sometime in the next year or two years, he's going to die." The book is dedicated to someone who died aged 15, so Hill's intention may well be to re-create a "real life" of a boy with muscular dystrophy. Although Simon dreams of walking or running in slow motion, (the most popular cliché attached to the non-walker, closely followed by dreams of flying) he faces his waking world with brutal honesty, and refuses to be patronised.

The ending is sharp and sad and somehow manages to avoid sentimentality. "He was bad tempered and funny. He was fierce and tough and brave. He was my friend. I'm proud I knew him, and I'll never forget him. See ya Simon." Although the story is narrated by another, Simon is a real, memorable character who stays in the mind long after the reading is finished. But he dies, and the reader does not have to imagine the possibilities of life for a disabled person.

Most of the books discussed so far have dealt with characters disabled from the beginning of the story. Developing the trend to explore difficult emotional journeys, a number of writers have devised characters who become disabled during the story. In these "rite of passage" novels, the protagonist has a disabling accident or illness, often paralysing, and has to embark on a painful journey until they reach some kind of accommodation to their new situation. These books, usually aimed at female "young adult" readers, explore changed self-image, loss of self-esteem, relationships with family and friends, sex, romance and the psychological adjustment to the loss of mobility. Sometimes they also explore the political and social aspects of becoming disabled - barriers, prejudices and exclusion - but this is rare. Deenie by Judy Blume (1973) and Izzy Willy Nilly by Cynthia Voight (1986), both by leading American writers, are two important books that deal with this subject. Calling Tracy by Clare Cherrington (1993) is a simpler story aimed at younger readers and a more recent title for young adults is Fighting Back by Wendy Orr (1996). In order to emphasise the fall from grace, the central character is often a champion of some kind, physically active and terrifically successful or especially beautiful. Deenie is gorgeous and her mother has plans for her to be a model before she is diagnosed with adolescent idiopathic scoliosis. Izzy is pretty, popular and a cheerleader when she is injured in a car crash with her drunken date. Tracy is a star skater before a fall from a tree and Anna in Fighting Back is a karate champion until she is badly injured in a car crash. There is the odd inconsistency or lack of accuracy but it is rarely significant to the development of the story. All are direct, first person accounts with the voice of the newly disabled girl absolutely central to the story.
The accident or illness in these books is almost always portrayed as a tragedy to be overcome. The characters feel ugly and useless, full of self-loathing. When Deenie slashes at her hair after learning that she has to wear her brace for the next four years, she says, "If I was going to be ugly I was going to be ugly all the way....as ugly as anybody'd ever been before... maybe even uglier." The characters start to define themselves with the words they have heard others use to describe disabled people. Shortly after her accident Izzy thinks, "I couldn't think what to do with my life, what to want to do because all the things I wanted to do required normal people and I wasn't normal any more. I was abnormal -- who would ask me to dance with him now? Who would want to go out with a cripple?" and when her friends abandon her, she thinks, "I could understand it. I mean I wouldn't have wanted to be friends with a cripple either." Anna in Fighting Back is also unable to see how she can be both "normal" and "permanently impaired":

Impaired's an ugly word. Worse than handicapped. Disabled. Invalid.
Am I disabled? How could I be? I'm still the same person -- just can't do a few things.... When do you stop being normal and turn into a handicapped person?

These books are not religious in the way of the Victorian novel, but they have their own morality and part of the lesson the characters are expected to learn is to remember how unkind they have been to disabled people in the past. Izzy remembers how awful she has been to a girl whose face has been burned and how her eyes were drawn to stare at her. Judy Blume foreshadows Deenie's diagnosis of adolescent scoliosis by having her observe at the beginning of the book. "I try not to look at Old Lady Murray because she's so ugly she makes me want to vomit. She has a big bump on her back and can't stand up straight". And a few pages later. "Our town doesn't have school buses, except for the one that picks up the handicapped kids. They come to our school from all over." She avoids Gina, a girl on her street who was knocked over by a truck and is in the "special class" because she wouldn't know how to act or anything" but at the end of the book, she looks into the classroom and sees Gina working on the blackboard and thinks, "I wonder if she sees herself as a handicapped person or just a regular girl, like me."

Izzy and Deenie learn humility and discover that the prettiest, most popular girls can sometimes let you down when bad things happen, and that real friendship can be found with girls you previously rejected. So, Izzy becomes friends with awkward, clumsy but intelligent Rosamunde, a girl from a much poorer background and Deenie pals up with Barbara, a girl with eczema she has previously nicknamed the "Creeping Crud". It is only when Deenie too becomes "untouchable" that she begins to see that Barbara is "a really nice person" and when the teacher tells them to choose partners in gym, they look at each other and grab hands.

The ending of such stories can present problems, since unlike their Victorian or Edwardian equivalents, good writers for young people have stopped using miraculous cure as a way of resolving the physical or psychological problems that arise from a serious accident. Religious faith no longer provides the moral framework in modern stories and belief in the power of "nature" to promote healing as in Frances Hodgson Burnett's The Secret Garden now seems somehow either too modern and "alternative" or too old fashioned and unscientific. However, most writers are reluctant to end the story without at least a partial cure and this is most often brought about by medical science, with a positive attitude to healing and "inner strength" taking an important second place. Although none are the same as they were when the story began, all the characters in these stories make some kind of recovery. Deenie is going to go through a difficult four years with her Milwaukee Brace but at some time in the future her spine will be straight. Izzy will always be an "amputee" and will never make cheerleader again, but she will get an artificial leg that no one will notice. Anna has a "permanent impairment" and lives with some pain, but at the end of the story she is walking again without any assistance.
Wheelchairs appear in most of these stories although there is often some kind of symbolic rejection, not significantly different to what happens to the wheelchairs used in by Clara in *Heidi* or Colin in *The Secret Garden*. Even in these late 20th century novels the wheelchair is still viewed as a symbol of dependency and restriction. When Izzy's mother sends her wheelchair back to the hospital, she remarks, "I was glad, even thankful to be on crutches. First thing Monday, my mother returned both the walker and the wheelchair so I knew she was as happy as I was to get rid of them. On crutches I could move from room to room without feeling too much of a cripple." Her newfound friend Rosamunde admires the way she now sits "on a real chair, just like a real person" as if the person in the wheelchair was not Izzy at all.

Anna's feelings of triumph when her wheelchair is sent back to the hospital go further, as if the wheelchair had some malevolent power to constrain her. "The wheelchair's leaving. Cleaned, folded, packed into the boot of dad's car like a guilty secret. Tough luck chair. I win, you lose -- I'm not a cripple after all." Walking makes her "normal" and her contempt extends to all the equipment she has used in the story. Of her walking stick she says, "But that's temporary; I'll be getting rid of it soon. A stick makes me look disabled -- spastic."

In all these novels, the central characters have a future ahead of them and there is a tempered optimism in the endings, often helped along by the prospect of a new boyfriend. Surprisingly perhaps, there are few "enlightened adults" to provide experience and guidance for young people growing up, as Miss Temple does for Jane Eyre or Marmee for Jo in *Little Women*. Perhaps it is difficult for writers to imagine an adult disabled person having qualities necessary to act as teacher and guide, so the character has to learn to do these new things all by herself, with only negative ideas about the lives of disabled people.

*A Different Life* (Keith, 1994) was my own attempt at a story about a teenage girl who cannot walk after an accident/ illness. 15-year-old Libby is not especially pretty or popular and not at all sporty. She becomes paralysed after a mysterious illness that is hard for the doctors to diagnose. The issues for her are the same as for the characters in the other stories; friendship, boyfriends or the lack of them, parents, self-image, school and exams, but included are issues of exclusion and prejudice that disabled people can face. In this story, Libby has to learn to fight her own battles but she also has Barbara. Perhaps Barbara is a modern version of Cousin Helen in *What Katy Did*, a sort of Victorian equivalent of a guide and comforter through the most difficult parts of her journey. Disabled herself, she is certainly not saintly or angelic like Helen, but she occupies a similar role as an example of what life can be like for Libby. Cousin Helen uses the metaphor of God's "School of Pain" to explain to Katy how to get through a difficult time; a century later, Barbara explains to Libby that what the doctors, nurses and physiotherapists are saying to her might not be the most helpful way to deal with her new world:

> People around you do what they think's best for you -- it's just that their training, their goal in life is to restore you to a state that's as near to normal as possible, and for them 'normal' means walking. That's not their fault. It's the way society looks at the world. They want everyone to be 'normal'. Normally average. They think a wheelchair -- using a wheelchair -- must be the end of the world. I didn't have any choice in looking at things in a different way.

At the end of the story it is clear that the wheelchair is not something to be flung over the mountain as in *Heidi*, nor even returned to the hospital. It is something functional and practical, a help along the road to independence.

Two books which have found their way into this piece despite not being about non walking children are included because they are rare examples of how books
dealing with impairment and disability can be honest without being tragic: they are serious and funny, personal and political. Australian writer Morris Gleitzman’s books *Blabbermouth* (1992) and its sequel *Sticky Bea* (1993), have Rowena (Ro) at the centre of the story. Ro was born without the ability to speak. She can hear and she can communicate but her vocal cords do not work. Although such a condition is rare, (presumably it does exist, but it is certainly not common) it has the advantage of being full of metaphorical possibilities. She has a big personality and lots to say - hence the ironic title *Blabbermouth*. Ro’s “problem” is not her inability to speak; although this presents enormous inconveniences for her she doesn’t hate herself for it. She is a whole person, not one struggling to have the “self within” shine through in order to overcome the deficits of the body without. She wants metaphorically and literally to be heard; she wants her dad to be less embarrassing and most of all, she wants a real, true friend.

The book opens with Rowena’s first day in her new school. When the class bully calls her names, she stuffs a frog in his mouth and binds it with tape to render him silent. She previously attended a “special” school that the government closed down and where her best friend Erin died a year earlier; a sadness that re-visits her when she is feeling lonely or insecure. Although she has some good memories of these times, being “sent back to special school” is an anxiety that runs through both stories.

Like many an earlier character in children’s fiction, Rowena is a half orphan. She has a father but her mother died when she was very young. However, unlike her Victorian equivalent, Rowena’s father is far from absent. He is a loving, devoted and sometimes excruciatingly embarrassing parent who wears lurid satin shirts and sings country and western. She communicates with him by sign language and with most other people by writing. Using sign language has a number of advantages. It means, for example that Rowena and her dad can speak over the noise of the tractor on his newly acquired, weevil infested apple farm.

Gleitzman takes fictional conventions about disabled children and turns them inside out: for example the “project”. In her first week in school, Rowena, delighted to find a great friend in Amanda Cosgrove, is thrilled when Amanda invites her home to tea. That is, until she hears the dreaded words, “Community Service Project.” Rowena has to make the difficult decision between friendship and pride and like many children; she chooses the possibility of friendship. In a wonderful parody of the benefits of charity work, Amanda’s nauseating father introduces Rowena with the words, “I’m going to ask each of our Helping Hands to bring their Community Service Projectee up onto the stage, and tell us a little about them, so that we, as a community as a whole can help them to live fuller and more rewarding lives.” But Rowena can never be a silent victim and with Amanda translating for her, she explains to an astonished audience, “I’ve got problems making word sounds.... Perhaps you’ve got problems making a living, or a sponge cake, or number twos.” And then, “You can feel sympathy for me if you want, and I can feel sympathy for you if I want. And I do feel sympathy for any of you who haven’t got a true friend.”

The ending satisfyingly combines sentimentality and pride. Confident in the love of her dad and her new mum, when the newborn baby, a longed for sibling (named Erin after her friend who died) lets out a howl that rattles the windows, Rowena holding her proudly, announces. “This is my baby sister, and there’s nothing wrong with either of us”.

In a recent interview, British writer Philip Ridley (2000) talked about his reasons for including disabled children in his books, one of which was that although a voracious reader, he has no memory of any disabled characters in the stories he read as a child. (Another was that two of his best friends used wheelchairs and this was a natural part of his world.) His novel *Scribbleboy* (1997) is a good example of a story that includes a disabled child who is not a “problem”. *Scribbleboy* is a slightly surreal adventure about wonderful graffiti that appears to brighten up a dull,
slightly surreal adventure about wonderful graffiti that appears to brighten up a dull, concrete estate. The central character is Bailey, a new kid on the block, who feels sad and lonely after his mother leaves home. His first friend is Ziggy, a mixture of confidence and sadness who is also badly in need of a new friend. He is introduced like this:

A boy about 11 years old, thin, pale, with large brown eyes. He was wearing a green anorak, a white button up shirt, open at the collar, corduroy trousers and slippers. His hair was jet black and very curly

Bailey's first thought was: he's very short.

His second thought was: negative, not short. He's sitting down.

The third: why's the chair on wheels?

Then he realised: the boy was in a wheelchair.

'Welcome, welcome, welcome, New Kid!' cried the boy, approaching Bailey....My name is Ziggy Fuzz.

There are discussions about how it feels to be Ziggy, but the plot centres on keeping the legend of the Scribbleboy alive and re-uniting families. Ziggy is not the main character but he remains in the story right up to the end. His role is important; the problems he faces living in a high-rise building are discussed, but issues of cure, doctors and walking again don't come into it.

In discussing the future of disability in children's fiction, comparisons are often made between the future contribution of disabled writers to literature and contributions by black writers over the last decades. Influential writers of the 1970's such as Julius Lester (e.g. *Long Journey Home* and *Basketball Game*, 1977), Rosa Guy (e.g. *The Friends, Ruby, The Disappearance*, 1977) and Mildred Taylor's series of books starting with *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*, (1977) brought not only a new subject matter to children's fiction but also a completely new way of writing about black people's experiences. Their work dramatically transformed the face of books for children, whether about black people's history and the experience of racism, or family life and the individual trials and tribulations of growing up. It was clear that these books provided knowledge and insight as well as literary experience quite different to that of previous books.

Similarly, disabled writers argue that the disability movement, like any other movement struggling to get its voice heard, needs its own literature and writers able to "name" their experience in order to understand it. (Keith, 1994, pg.3) But just as black writers are not writing solely for the edification of black children, so the growing body of writers who are themselves disabled want their books to be read and understood by all kinds of readers. It is to be hoped that like black writers, disabled writers will write from a different perspective, less prone to stereotypes of tragedy and despair; less full of "problems" and "issues" with no solution; less "blaming" of the disabled person as if no social factors were involved. There is a wealth of experience and history to draw on and disabled writers will certainly do this differently.

On the other hand, we do not want a situation where white writers do not feel that they can include black people, where men do not feel they can write about women and where almost nobody feels they can write about disabled people. The experience of being disabled by attitude and prejudice as well as the often-tricky business of living with an impairment is enormously varied, and this has huge potential in books for children. Young readers today need what they have always needed: good books which let the imagination do its own work; provide them with a valuable literary experience; teach them things they don't know and help them to understand things they do; make them laugh or cry. They need books with lively, well-rounded, memorable characters. Some of these characters need to be
disabled and some of the books will be written by people who know about this from their own lives.

References:


In many books, disability, where it occurs, and its cure are associated with character. Cure may result directly from a healthier attitude to life, often implying a voluntary relinquishment of the disabled role. She suffered not only from attacks of actual pain and illness, but from the limitations on her life caused by the need to go to bed early, avoid going out in bad weather, and avoid even mental exertion. Nineteenth century books currently in print reflect not only the attitudes of the authors and of 19th century readers, but also those of the later readers who have kept them in print. The saintly invalid and the tamed headstrong girl may, after all, have been demanded as much or more by the mid- and late-20th century reader than by the 19th century reader.