Understanding Disability in Literature Through Graphic Novels

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Creative expression is as varied as the number of stars in the sky. The same is true of literature. A play by Shakespeare, a sonnet by Dickinson, or a memoir about mortality each use eloquent phrasing to deepen understanding of the human condition. The medium of comics and graphic novels may not seem to Pt into the traditional literature genre; however, comics and graphic novels have long been a medium used to tell stories. And much of this medium has focused on disability.

Comics initially originated as commentary about issues, typically politics, and evolved into a marketing technique for attracting readers to the Sunday newspapers. In the early 1900s, comics gained popularity in the United States by Prst publishing compilations of Sunday comics and original content serialized over volumes. Superman created the demand for superhero comics and became the most popular subject for comic books (Bui n.d.).

Other early narratives of comics portrayed disabilities through comedic characters. Looney Tunes, Disney, and Marvel characters were not monstrous or evil, and some were very beloved through story or Plm (Jadir 2019). As comics became more sophisticated, the genre turned to a depiction of disabled characters as superheroes. Batman was said to have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, a bullet from the Joker paralyzed Batgirl, and Daredevil was a crime Pghter blinded by a chemical accident.

Graphic novels grew out of the serialization of comics into book-length stories. Modern graphic novels currently occupy a distinct publishing category and include Pction, non-Pction, and memoirs. Author and illustrator Mark Siegel spoke of the power of the graphic novel, saying,

We're moving into an age where there's a visual literacy that can go as deep and as substantive as prose literacy. People are being raised to think both visually and verbally. The graphic novel does those two things, and the dance of those two produces an experience. (Siegel 2017)

An author's reasons to choose to represent literature visually are as varied as the authors themselves. Contemporary children's book writer Cece Bell wrote about her own experience as a deaf child, choosing the graphic novel format.

The main reason that I believed the graphic novel format was the best format for my story is: SPEECH BALLOONS. They are awesome. They let me show the reader exactly what my character is hearing, or not hearing—a very important thing to show in a story about deafness. (Bell 2015) Author Ellen Forney wrote the graphic novel *Marbles* to share the very personal story of her journey through a bipolar diagnosis. Being a storyteller by trade, the graphic novel format allowed Forney to draw what it felt like. She described pictures as intuitive and able to convey her story more fully (Forney 2019). Illustrator David Small described his book *Stitches* as "a silent movie masquerading as a book... a memoir as a tale of redemption that informs us that things can get better, that good can emerge from evil, and that art has the power to transform." In discussing this deeply troubling story of a boy with a physical disability living in an abusive home, the author revealed that the emotions of his experience emerged when he began to draw (Small n.d.).

The simple comic submitted was created on the program Pixton. The story centers on a child first diagnosed with a learning disability and the experience of starting language therapy. It tells of the emotions felt by a helpless parent and the mixture of support from school administrators, teachers, diagnosticians, and a language therapist. Although this story is about a child with a disability, she exists in the background, a metaphor for families who struggle to cope with and support loved ones facing disability.

A graphic novel is not a simplistic form. In some ways, the process adds more complexity to the written words due to the ability to visually interpret and show an additional layer of emotions. As health practitioners seek a deeper understanding of the human condition, it is valuable to be open to the many

different forms of expression others may use to tell their stories. A realistic portrayal of all kinds of disability could help shift the perspective from ableism as the norm to greater inclusion for everyone.

"See Molly's Magical World on following page"

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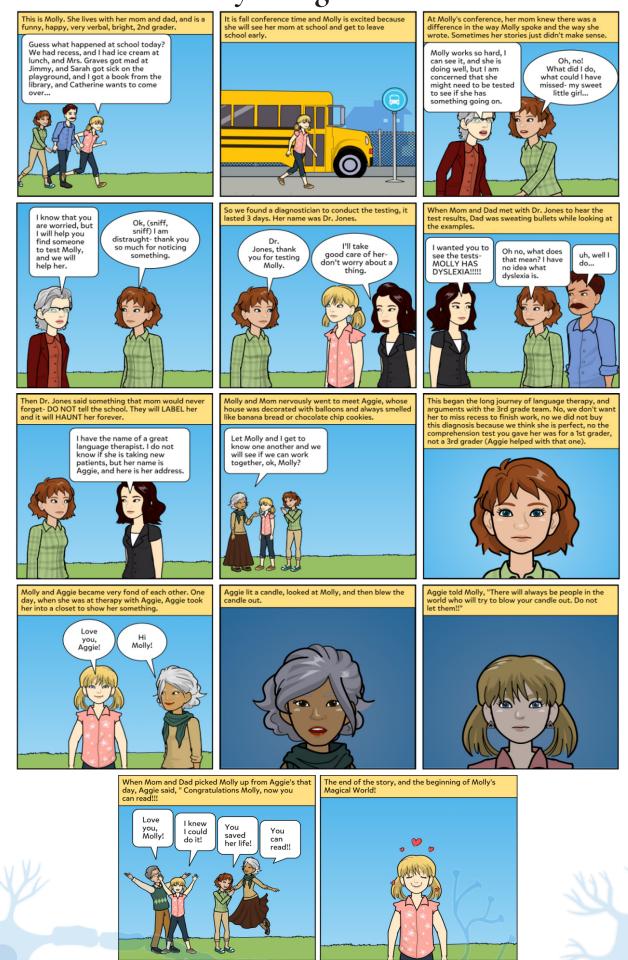
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Molly's Magical World



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