



# 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 fit 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 first 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 film (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 fighter 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 fiction, non-fiction, 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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# Molly's Magical World

This is Molly. She lives with her mom and dad, and is a funny, happy, very verbal, bright, 2nd grader.

Guess what happened at school today? We had recess, and I had ice cream at lunch, and Mrs. Graves got mad at Jimmy, and Sarah got sick on the playground, and I got a book from the library, and Catherine wants to come over...

It is fall conference time and Molly is excited because she will see her mom at school and get to leave school early.

At Molly's conference, her mom knew there was a difference in the way Molly spoke and the way she wrote. Sometimes her stories just didn't make sense.

Molly works so hard, I can see it, and she is doing well, but I am concerned that she might need to be tested to see if she has something going on.

Oh, no! What did I do, what could I have missed- my sweet little girl...

I know that you are worried, but I will help you find someone to test Molly, and we will help her.

Ok, (sniff, sniff) I am distraught- thank you so much for noticing something.

So we found a diagnostician to conduct the testing, it lasted 3 days. Her name was Dr. Jones.

Dr. Jones, thank you for testing Molly.

I'll take good care of her- don't worry about a thing.

When Mom and Dad met with Dr. Jones to hear the test results, Dad was sweating bullets while looking at the examples.

I wanted you to see the tests- MOLLY HAS DYSLEXIA!!!!

Oh no, what does that mean? I have no idea what dyslexia is.

uh, well I do...

Then Dr. Jones said something that mom would never forget- DO NOT tell the school. They will LABEL her and it will HAUNT her forever.

I have the name of a great language therapist. I do not know if she is taking new patients, but her name is Aggie, and here is her address.

Molly and Mom nervously went to meet Aggie, whose house was decorated with balloons and always smelled like banana bread or chocolate chip cookies.

Let Molly and I get to know one another and we will see if we can work together, ok, Molly?

This began the long journey of language therapy, and arguments with the 3rd grade team. No, we don't want her to miss recess to finish work, no we did not buy this diagnosis because we think she is perfect, no the comprehension test you gave her was for a 1st grader, not a 3rd grader (Aggie helped with that one).

Molly and Aggie became very fond of each other. One day, when she was at therapy with Aggie, Aggie took her into a closet to show her something.

Aggie lit a candle, looked at Molly, and then blew the candle out.

Aggie told Molly, "There will always be people in the world who will try to blow your candle out. Do not let them!!"

Molly and Aggie became very fond of each other. One day, when she was at therapy with Aggie, Aggie took her into a closet to show her something.

Love you, Aggie!

Hi Molly!

When Mom and Dad picked Molly up from Aggie's that day, Aggie said, "Congratulations Molly, now you can read!!!"

The end of the story, and the beginning of Molly's Magical World!

Love you, Molly!

I knew I could do it!

You saved her life!

You can read!!