Narrative Strategies and Fictional Intellectual Disabilities

Michael Patrick Hart
The Pennsylvania State University

Michael Bérubé. *The Secret Life of Stories: From Don Quixote to Harry Potter, How Understanding Intellectual Disability Transforms the Way We Read.* New York UP, 2016. xiii, 223 pp. $24.95 cloth. $11.99 e-book.

In The Secret Life of Stories, *Michael Bérubé offers a new model for understanding literary deployments of intellectual disability that, unlike past frameworks in Disability Studies, does not necessarily depend on the direct representation of disability.*

Keywords: disability studies / intellectual disability / narrative theory / Michael Bérubé

Do not let the slenderness of *The Secret Life of Stories* fool you. It is a massive book both in terms of terrain and impact. Over the course of five chapters, Michael Bérubé continually stresses the importance of studying intellectual disability within fiction as well as the need to understand the *deployment* of these fictional intellectual disabilities instead of focusing on the verisimilitude of intellectual disability's representation. Indeed, from the beginning Bérubé emphasizes that "[r]epresentations of disability are ubiquitous, far more prevalent and pervasive than (almost) anybody realizes [because] disability has a funny way of popping up everywhere without announcing itself *as* disability" (1). Bérubé's observation that disability "pops up" everywhere without necessarily naming itself separates his work from previous disability theory cornerstone texts. In particular he situates *Secret Life* as a response to Ato Quayson's *Aesthetic Nervousness* and Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell's foundational *Narrative Prosthesis*.

Michael Patrick Hart (mph195@psu.edu) is a doctoral candidate in English at The Pennsylvania State University. His research focuses on the academic formalization of English literary studies and the relationship it creates between theories of reading and the production of identity.

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Disability "popping up everywhere" entails deployments of disability that are not strictly confined to representation but also include "narrative strategies, devices for exploring vast domains of human thought, experience and action" (2). In *Secret Life,* Bérubé organizes these strategies into three categories: Motive, Time, and Self-Awareness. Though, as he continually reminds us, these categories are leaky, often bleeding into one another.

In his introduction, "Stories," Bérubé offers us just that. These stories recount the genesis of *Secret Life* and foreshadow the narrative strategies that outline Bérubé's analytical framework. His anecdotes ultimately reveal that disability is, "always already, a social relation, involving beliefs and social practices that structure the apprehension of disability—and of putative human 'norms'" (25). This is not necessarily to support the social model of disability, which, as Disability Studies scholars tend to agree, was at one time quite useful but now seems somewhat problematic. No, Bérubé's emphasis on the place of disability within social systems reinforces why it does not matter whether Character X has disability Y. "What matters," writes Bérubé, "is the web of social relations that constitutes other people's responses to [Character X]" (24–25). Diagnostic reading is limited. We must, instead, focus on the narrative deployments of disability.

As Bérubé elaborates in his first chapter, "Motive," these narrative deployments do not necessarily entail a direct representation of disability. Specifically, intellectual disability does not need to be represented in a text in order to provide motive. Here, Bérubé takes the *Harry Potter* series as his primary example. In the final installment, after Voldemort has hit Harry with the Avada Kadavra killing curse, we find the titular hero in a purgatorial limbo, where he encounters Albus Dumbledore. It's here that Dumbledore reveals to Harry his youthful flirtation with Gellert Grindelwald and wizarding fascism. The driving force, the motive, behind Dumbledore's dalliance with Grindelwald? His sister Ariana's intellectual disability. As a small child, Ariana was attacked by muggles who witnessed her doing magic. As a consequence, she developed an intellectual disability. Her father, seeking revenge, assaulted the muggle boys, resulting in his imprisonment in Azkaban. He refused to tell the wizarding authorities the truth about the incidents, fearing that if he exposed Ariana's intellectual disability, she would ultimately be sent to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries—to the Janus Thickey Ward where patients are locked inside, much like an asylum. Next, the Dumbledore family matriarch was accidentally killed when Ariana could not control one of her "rages" (35). Father imprisoned, mother entombed, Albus was forced to return home to look after Ariana, much to his dismay. A star student and thinking himself destined for much greater things, Albus felt a certain disdain for having to care for an intellectually disabled sister. So when Grindelwald came along, Dumbledore saw not only a way to reach his full wizarding potential but also a means to enact vengeance on the muggle world that, up to that point, had held him back through their treatment of Ariana. And yet, as much as Ariana motivates the actions of the entire Dumbledore family, she

herself never makes an appearance in the novel save for her portrait on Aberforth's wall. Through Ariana, Rowling "install[s] intellectual disability at the heart of a narrative that includes *no direct representation* of a character with intellectual disability" (36, emphasis mine).

This situation, argues Bérubé, reflects Ato Quayson's concept of the "ethical core" from *Aesthetic Nervousness.* However, as Bérubé reminds us, Quayson's ethical core remains a nebulous term, itself the ethical core of Quayson's own work. If it is obvious in *Harry Potter* where issues of justice and disability are intrinsically linked, what about narratives without the presence of a character with an intellectual disability? As Bérubé posits, "[i]ntellectual disability can be a textual matter—a matter for the text, and a motive for its characters—even when there are no characters with intellectual disabilities to be found" (38). Here, he examines Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, where it is not the presence of disability but rather the social stigma of disability that represents the novel's ethical core. Thus Bérubé unveils a key limitation to Quayson's otherwise "capacious framework;" that is, Quayson's insistence that "aesthetic nervousness" depends on an interaction between disabled and nondisabled characters, and thereby necessitates representation of characters with disabilities (40). Through such a dependence, Quayson's model does not account for narrative techniques that construct disability without needing its representation.

Bérubé limns a similar critique of Snyder and Mitchell's *Narrative Prosthesis,* which presents a model of narrative theory that, like Quayson's, depends more on characters than narrative. Bérubé does not dispute the value *Narrative Prosthesis* offered the field of Disability Studies, but he points out the limitations of a system that, ultimately, ends up treating all narratives the same. Under their model, all disability operates similarly. First a deviance is exposed. Then the narrative consolidates its own existence with an origin story of said deviance. Third, the deviance moves from periphery to center. Finally, the rest of the story "rehabilitates" the deviance (Snyder and Mitchell 53). This model, according to Bérubé, can take us down two different routes, one resembling a "hermeneutics of suspicion," the other emphasizing the Russian formalist dictum to "lay bare the device" (44–46). Either way, disability is presented as something always to be interpreted, which leaves one with the sense that interpretation does violence to disability and people with disabilities. But sometimes, writes Bérubé, a "disabled cigar is just a disabled cigar" (49). Disability, he argues, does not work to one determined end. And Bérubé stands firmly committed to this belief of "radical individuation" (49). To this end, he examines a wide swath of individuated texts throughout his book, which, though assigned to a particular modality in Motive, Time, or Self-Awareness, oftentimes sneak into other chapters. For example, in "Motive" Bérubé concludes with readings of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* and J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* in order to show how intellectual disability does not just structure the narrative and social relations in these texts but also structures all interpretative procedures, including within the very novel itself. While Bérubé studies this narrative technique in relation to

motive, he also demonstrates how that technique allows for narrative experiments with time, which leads into the second chapter of the book.

In "Time" Bérubé opens with *The Sound and the Fury* and he reasons that the difficulty in understanding Benjy's section stems from the fact that he has a different sense of time than most of us. Benjy's atypical perception of time clearly shapes his supposedly disorganized narrative. Bérubé further argues that Benjy is not merely an unmediated recording of temporally disordered events; he has, to some extent, conscious control over his narrative and therefore its temporal structuring. This, Bérubé concludes, shows how narrative experiments with time and intellectual disability illuminate the relationality of time; moreover, they indicate that time itself can "become human" (84). This illumination, given how time operates in the nonliterary world, can only be reached through fiction. With this in mind, Bérubé arranges a "shotgun marriage" between Paul Ricoeur and Mikhail Bakhtin to produce an intellectual disability chronotope, "by which narrative marks its relation to intellectual disability precisely by rendering intellectual disability as a productive and illuminating derangement of ordinary protocols of narrative temporality" (83). The intellectual disability chronotope allows narrative to expand beyond boundaries of normative human experience and human perception, and therefore also allow for the inclusion of other types of consciousness.

Bérubé develops his idea of the intellectual disability chronotope through Philip K. Dick's *Martian Time-Slip*, which features a character with an intellectual disability, Manfred, who, like Benjy, has a unique perception of time. Not only can Manfred see far into the future—a future where the human colony on Mars is crumbling and Manfred himself is imprisoned by a bevy of medical equipment keeping his non-functioning body alive—but he also can apparently exert some bit of control over time. In a series of textual recursions, the titular "time-slips," we see how Manfred "fool[s] around" with time (Dick 227). However, the reader recognizes that these time-slips are not solely contained by Manfred's consciousness. Certain phrases and internal thoughts are clearly focalized through other characters. Thus, *Martian Time-Slip* does not simply depict a character with an intellectual disability who experiences a radically different sense of time and narrative. Dick's novel textualizes Manfred's intellectual disability such that it pervades the very structure of the work. "Time," writes Bérubé, "is not the only thing being warped here; the entire narrative fabric is twisting" around Manfred's intellectual disability (89). The leakiness of time and the leakiness of Manfred's consciousness is proliferative, forcing the reader to acknowledge different forms of being in time, especially with regard to intellectual disability. Perhaps even more importantly, as in *The Sound and the Fury, Martian Time-Slip* produces an intellectual disability chronotope featuring an "unambiguously *fictional* disability," and yet both novels demand that we consider, "in the starkest of terms," how we are to treat those we consider the most vulnerable (103). A question Bérubé reiterates at the end of the chapter, and a question that percolates throughout the entire work.

Indeed, "Self-Awareness," Bérubé's third chapter, ends by asking the very same question. But first, Bérubé takes us through a variety of textual examples,

including more recent works like Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time,* Elizabeth Moon's *Speed of Dark*, and J.M. Coetzee's *Foe,* as well as older novels such as Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Conrad's *The Secret Agent,* and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. On this latter text Bérubé spills the most ink as he explores how Cervantes's novel constructs its own self-awareness as a text in addition to the self-awareness (or seemingly lack thereof) of its intellectually disabled main character. Don Quixote, Bérubé contends, is intellectually disabled in that he lacks "metarepresentational capacity"—a disability that "warps the text, turning it back on itself in a dizzying series of metafictional reflections on the nature of fiction and the nature of reflection" (142–43). Quixote's lack of a metarepresentational capacity not only serves to create metafictional textual effects, but in the process of that creation, breaks the fictional framework in confirmation of it. Thus, "intellectual disability becomes the occasion or the device for forging a link between the mechanics of metarepresentation and the machinations of metafiction" (144). Bérubé tethers metarepresentation with metafiction to claim that a text mimics self-consciousness when it ruminates over its own textual operations. And when this "textual self-awareness" involves intellectual disability, the text is no longer limited to formal literary experimentation (160). An intellectually disabled narrative forces readers to reimagine the very parameters of narrative. Likewise, an intellectually disabled self-consciousness requires a reexamination of how we understand self-consciousness—as well as a reexamination of how we treat those with a self-consciousness that falls outside of normative boundaries.

In his last section, "Minds," Bérubé goes on the offensive. He specifically takes to task both Theory of the Mind and literary Darwinism (also known as evocriticism) for the ways these schools of thought depend on producing a normative "mind," whatever that may be, at the expense of those who do not fit into neurotypicality. With regards to Theory of the Mind, which alleges that we are aware that others have minds and therefore intentions, Bérubé singles out Lisa Zunshine's critical work. For Zunshine, we have Theory of the Mind because some do not—namely autists. Zunshine claims that autists have "mindblindness," a term she takes from Simon Baron-Cohen, Director of Cambridge's Autism Research Centre. Zunshine, however, fails to recognize how this attribution of "mindblindness" to autists is itself a version of mindblindness to a consciousness that exists outside its own understanding of what constitutes a "normal" mind. Surprisingly, Zunshine eventually admits to her own mindblindness on the subject, but ultimately, her work still depends on a Theory of the Mind that reinstalls a normative conception of the human. Yet, according to Bérubé, she is far more benign than the Literary Darwinists, whose evocriticism depends on an utter antipathy to human individuation—something Bérubé champions throughout his work.

Essentially, literary Darwinism insists that humans evolved their story telling abilities as a means for survival. The evocritics take story-telling in general as an evolutionary advantage, and do not consider the specialized skills that go into story-telling. According to Bérubé, this generalization of story-telling causes

the evocritics, in particular Brian Boyd, to eschew environmental explanations for human behavior and to rely solely on "social-constructionist straw-humanists who apparently believe that human beings are infinitely malleable" (181). In his defense, Boyd does deserve credit for the cleverness of the title of his book: *On the Origin of Stories.* Yet in this allusion to Darwin, Boyd's work proves he has misread *On the Origin of Species,* which makes explicit that evolutionary adaptations are a function of environmental change, and that attempts to force evolution are nothing more than "man's feeble efforts" to outduel Mother Nature (Darwin 56). Boyd's literary Darwinism is a misnomer, for his work is more aptly a form of literary Darwinisticism.[1]

Still, Bérubé grants the first half of Boyd's book its due—describing it as "rousing stuff" that defends the necessity of art to the flourishing of the human (182). Unfortunately, Boyd, in the second half of his book, tries to normativize this human, reducing the mind to one of universal features. Boyd also abhors Theory, but never considers that Theory itself is produced by the same great minds that produce the very literature he so venerates. Boyd generalizes Theory just as he generalizes the human mind. And in doing so, he creates a limited definition of the mind marked by excluding those that don't necessarily fit into this particular interpretative mode.

This exclusionism of Boyd's misnamed literary Darwinism forces Bérubé, despite his insistence on the formalist nature of his project, to take up the question of social justice that, as I mentioned earlier, seems to brew throughout this literary project. This is understandable, given the fact that a 2004 decision written by the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals was used to justify the 2012 execution of Marvin Wilson, an intellectually disabled man. The 2004 decision explicitly cites Steinbeck in its defense of capital punishment for the intellectually disabled. "The idea," writes Bérubé, "is a simple and utterly reprehensible one: the understanding of intellectual disability in fiction can be used as a device for exempting some people with intellectual disabilities from the Supreme Court decision in *Atkins v. Virginia*—and killing them" (192). *The Secret of Life of Stories* cannot help but conclude that the interpretative stakes of literature and intellectual disability are no longer limited to formal questions—they have potentially dire social implications as well. Thus, Bérubé shows us how intellectually disability not only transforms the way we read fiction, but also the way we read the very narratives of our own lives.

Note

1. Morse Peckham identified this difference between Darwinism and Darwinisticism in a special issue of *Victorian Studies* celebrating the centennial of *On the Origin of Species.* Essentially, "Darwinism" is just that: Darwin's theory of evolutionary. Whereas "Darwinisticism" is an "evolutionary metaphysic" that can be mapped onto a variety other theories: social, economic, aesthetic. "It can be anything which claims to have support from the *Origin,* or conversely anything which claims to have really understood what Darwin inadequately and partially presented" (32).

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