

Assisting Young Readers in the Interpretation of a Character with Disabilities in Iain Lawrence's Juvenile Fiction Novel *Gemini Summer*

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Abstract

The character of Dopey Colvig in Iain Lawrence's Governor General's Award Winning juvenile fiction novel Gemini Summer is presented as an inherent villain based on physical differences as well as concise narration of his inexplicable dislike for the novel's protagonist. Whether his depiction as Marx's repressed/the Other rests on the historical context of the novel and related stereotypes about disability, or on patterns of folktale literature which resound in the storyline, young readers need guidance in their interpretation of Dopey's presence within the novel if they are to avoid generalizations of stereotypes within the narrative.

Iain Lawrence's Governor General's Award winning juvenile fiction novel *Gemini Summer* (Delacorte Press, 2006) depicts a time and place in the early sixties where brothers Beau and Danny engage in seemingly idyllic pursuits, enjoying the outdoors and following the Apollo human spaceflight program. At the same time, they attempt to avoid a neighbourhood bully prophetically named Dopey Colvig. The death of the elder brother, and then his possible reincarnation as a stray dog, make what is initially gritty realism take on a magic quality, softening the heartbreaking images of the book's most poignant scenes. One of the most striking elements of the novel is its "monster," Dopey Colvig—son of Creepy—who lives at the northern end of the

Hollow, near the short-cut the boys use on their way to and from the heights and the local school.

“Not one person in Hog’s Hollow found a single thing to like about Creepy... But Dopey was worse.... having a “huge, empty head with no brains inside it,” and talking in “grunts and howls—that no one but Creepy could understand. He was too stupid to go to school, and so he never left the Hollow” and “for no reason at all, he hated Danny River, and he guarded his end of the Hollow like a troll, lurking on the paths through the cottonwoods, waiting for Danny to pass.” (p.13)

The depiction of Dopey relies on physical descriptions involving his large head, his inability to speak intelligibly and his larger-than-average-sized body, along with narration defining him as “stupid.” He is also described as nurturing an inexplicable hatred for Danny. His presentation in the story continues on par with the indelibly wicked troll under the bridge in the classic folktale *Three Billy Goats’ Gruff*:

They were crossing the bridge when Dopey Colvig leapt out from the bushes, holding a stick as stout as a rolling pin. Feet apart, hands at his side, he stood right at the fork in the trail. He was half again as wide as Beau.

He made those sounds, those hoots and groans that only Creepy could understand. His great hollow head with its pudding of a face watched them like an owl’s. (p.60)

Although brothers Danny and Beau escape Dopey this time, as they have on other occasions, the memory of Dopey’s threats, and how he once tried to attack Danny with a realtor’s sign, swinging it like a broadaxe, keep anxiety on the surface for Danny:

There was a sort of children’s telegraph that had spread the story of the Colvigs and how they kept moving every time Dopey got in trouble. For Danny, the next move couldn’t come fast enough. He stuck more closely than ever to Beau in the mornings, and took the long way home nearly every day. (page 64)

On Hallowe’en night, after they suspect that Creepy has egged their house, Beau and Danny take a pail of human manure from their father’s septic truck and pour it into Creepy’s car. As they approach the house:

The living room was brightly lit, the curtains drawn to all but a crack in the middle. They could see the flicker of the television set, and a big round shadow on the curtains, cast by what must have been either a pumpkin or Dopey’s head. (p.73)

Although mild attempts at humour are made related to Dopey’s head size, there is

little sympathy for this character, and no explanation for his behaviour other than the stereotypical connections of aggression, size and intellectual capacity, through images of trolls and ogres. In one instance, his father yells at the boys, “ ‘Come down here and pick on someone who can fight back!’ ” (p.62), referring to himself, however there is no reflection on this statement, and no indication that it has made anyone within the context of the story see Dopey as a victim in any way.

Thomson (1997) reframes “disability” as a cultural construction of bodies and identity alongside race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality, and comments on the propensity of literary texts to strip “disabled” characters of normalizing contexts, allowing them to be engulfed by a single stigmatic trait. This is clear in the depiction of Dopey, whose rhetorical effect within the novel depends on disability’s cultural resonance just as the novel itself relies on an uncomplicated characterization of Dopey to meet plot requirements.

The use of minority groups as a metaphor in literature appears in one theory of the American horror film (Wood, 1979) involving a depiction of Marx’s repressed/ the Other, in the figure of the “Monster.” The death or disappearance of this monster in what might traditionally be defined as a “happy ending” signifies, in Wood’s view, “the restoration of repression” (p. 10). Whether present in real or threatened form, Wood’s examples include gender and ethnic minorities which have served the genre accordingly, and which, as marginalized groups, parallel, according to Thomson, people with disabilities. Certainly, in *Gemini Summer*, Dopey does his job very well, until, at the close, when readers may or may not realize his innocence, he and his father disappear—a kind of death in literature— following a common pattern where characters with disabilities either die or are cured. Authors, according to Keith (2001), tend not to imagine characters with disabilities moving towards a happy life, and, common in literature of the 19th and early 20th centuries but also evident in some contemporary fiction, dispose of them one way or another to achieve the traditional “happy ending.”

In modern children’s literature which typically is not of a satirical nature, critics do not accept a villain who is stereotypically described as part of a minority group according to culture or gender, yet depiction of disability has gone relatively unnoticed, even though, as Mitchell and Snyder (2000) indicate, disability is the “master trope of human disqualification” (p. 3) and affects all other marginalizing conditions. According to Keith (2001), senior academic study has “rarely shown any interest in disability as a topic for critical study” (p. 205).

As the classic “Monster” of our repressed fears, Dopey Colvig is inherently

dangerous, and, in the end, driven away by reason. I suggest that one important role of educators is to introduce this character to readers in a way which favours their understanding of the pattern on which he is based, and connect his depiction to a societal stereotype regarding people with special needs. Such a pattern could be contextualized within the historical setting of *Gemini Summer*, or it could emerge from relationships drawn between the novel and its roots in folk literature.

In the rural context of the early sixties, quite possibly children with physical descriptions similar to Dopey's might have been seen as inherently wicked. It was a time in North America when laws favouring inclusion were not yet drawn, when misunderstanding continued to fuel impressions about people with cognitive differences. Because societal viewpoints are presented but not evaluated within the narrative, readers will likely need assistance in distinguishing this point of view from contemporary philosophy regarding people with differences.

Thomson discusses how folktales manifest "the disabled body...almost always a freakish spectacle presented by the mediating narrative voice" (p.10). Described as ugly, large, and stupid, giants from *Jack in the Beanstalk* and ogres from *Little Thumb* are clearly defined as obvious and stereotypical villains for whom little explanation is needed for their desperate actions. Scant attention has been given to the lack of empathy for these characters in fiction, although some resolve is evident in modern fairy stories, where characters such as Shrek become uncharacteristically celebrated heroes.

Close examination of the structure of *Gemini Summer* reveals elements of folktale literature in addition to the construction and usage of disability as a metaphorical representation of evil. The main characters have singular motivation: each is concerned with one overriding desire. Old Man River digs a fallout shelter in case the war in Vietnam moves closer to home. Flo attempts to pen her own southern saga. Beau aspires to be an astronaut. Danny dreams of having a dog.

Other traits of folk literature resound. After the death of Beau, Danny's journey to Cape Canaveral reflects a common pattern which is symbolic of his movement towards self-discovery. The end of the novel supports a traditional, if unexpected, happy ending—difficult to imagine in a story where events have taken a tragic turn for the worse with the death of a revered elder brother. Inside this happy ending, magic is at work, under the supposition that Beau has come back to life in the form of Rocket, the dog. The ending also supports the concept of "the Other" in that Dopey has been dismissed from the story and, in this sense, annihilated.

The novel's elements of folk literature could indeed explain how Dopey, a

character rendered with a few determining strokes, has managed to become an acceptable antagonist. Yet, as Paley (1989) indicates, we are all influenced by the fears and prejudices, apprehensions and expectations which have become a carefully hidden part of all of us. Quite possibly, the depiction of a character such as Dopey Colvig, in a domestic drama reminiscent of the Victorian novel, has missed scrutiny. Literary critics have often interpreted characters with disabilities aesthetically or metaphorically, reading them without political elements (Thomson, 1997), but should we encourage young readers to do so?

Who, we might prompt, is Dopey Colvig? Is he a boy born with hydrocephaly before treatments were known, and does he suffer from related verbal and non-verbal learning disorders? Could he have Sotos Syndrome, or autism, or some other pervasive developmental condition which impacts his functioning to the extent described in the book? And, in spite of whatever causal factors there may be to explain his profile, what exactly is behind the perceived antagonism to Danny and his brother? Behavior is communication; what is this boy, with obvious special needs, trying to say?

Readers are not given information regarding Dopey Colvig's motivation, and, some would argue, it doesn't really matter. Within the context of the story, this character does his job with functional economy. It is critical, however, that readers be made aware of the author's purpose in developing him as a stereotypical character. An introduction to an ogre lurking at the ends of the Hollow is generally no invitation to linger, and thus, many readers will not stop to think, unless invited. At any moment, Dopey might jump out from the bushes or from under the bridge, weapon in hand...a monster who, when hit in the forehead with a stone, seems not even to notice, and keeps on coming...coming. What young reader would curiously turn in his direction, unprompted?

Readers who fully process the story's ending will see Dopey's potential innocence regarding the story's great tragedy—the death of Beau—which was, as Danny finally admits, accidental. The critical dilemma for Danny involves revealing who pushed his brother onto the spike. If he tells the truth, he is convinced that Dopey's father will come and murder him. He is considerably afraid of Creepy, even more so than his “delinquent” son who would, with Danny's testimony, be “put away” (p. 106) for a good, long time.

“My boy had nothing to do with it!” shouted Creepy Colvig. “Can't you get it through your head? He wasn't there! I go to work, he looks after himself. He takes care of himself. *My* boy doesn't run wild like a goddamn savage.” (p. 112)

But Dopey did push Beau, even as Danny hesitates in the accusation, and, for

many readers, this seals his guilt in spite of the information yet to come. Readers see Dopey presented as a savage, a thoroughly ruthless villain who only scrambles out from under his bridge when he wants to hurt someone. Even Rocket, who is a dog, or possibly Danny's reincarnated brother, knows this as a fact; he bites Dopey, to prove it. And in the end, when we hear that Dopey did indeed push Beau, Danny's qualifying speech may not register as absolution:

"It was an accident," he said. "Dopey came and stole the missile, and we were teasing him with it, like monkey in the middle. Then Dopey rushed at Beau, and... What happened, it was just an accident." (p.255)

Why Danny stresses the word *accident* isn't clear. Is he still afraid of Creepy? Does he somehow wish to protect Dopey, for whom he hasn't had an ounce of sympathy or understanding? Or is it just unfettered honesty, plain and simple, with no conscious attempt to vindicate Dopey? The latter appears to be the most plausible explanation.

The result: the Colvigs move away, "as they'd moved so many times before. Once again, Danny could wander wherever he wanted, up and down the trails, over the little bridge, always with Rocket behind him" (p.257). The monster is gone; one boy, anyway, lives happily ever after.

Marshall (1998) emphasizes how reading books about individual differences is an important tool in building communities which understand and respect diversity. Sharing books with children involves careful discussions of characterization, identifying stereotypes as well as personal reflections regarding the author's choices in character development. While much has been written about cultural and gender sensitivity, it is now time to pay attention to books which include characters with disabilities.

I designed the following rubric to assist readers in identifying and discussing characters such as Dopey Colvig, thereby creating a deeper understanding of these characters, as well as encouraging thoughtful comparisons between books and real life. I suggest that such a rubric can enhance children's experiences with *Gemini Summer* and with other books where stereotyping may possibly occur regarding characters with special needs. Senior students, along with their teachers, should be encouraged to develop rubrics of their own.

Exploration of Characters with Disabilities in Children's Fiction

Book Title _____

Author _____ Publication Date _____

Genre: _____ Character's Name _____

Main or Secondary Character? _____

Identification of Disability	Language Related to Exploration of Disability	Relationship Between Disability and Storyline	Growth and Development of Character	Relationships Between Characters	Relationships Between Character and Reader
<i>character's disability described without accuracy or detail</i>	<i>outdated and/or negative language used to describe the disability</i>	<i>character's disability not linked to storyline</i>	<i>character does not grow or develop during the course of the story</i>	<i>character does not establish meaningful relationships with other characters</i>	<i>readers have few opportunities to identify with character</i>
<i>character's disability described with some accuracy and detail</i>	<i>outdated and/or negative language used to describe the disability along with inclusion of information regarding setting/time of the story to contextualize this language</i>	<i>character's disability somewhat linked to storyline</i>	<i>character displays some growth and development during the course of the story</i>	<i>character establishes relationships meaningful only to another character not to self</i>	<i>readers have a number of opportunities to identify with character</i>
<i>character's disability described with considerable accuracy and detail</i>	<i>current and/or neutral language used to describe the disability</i>	<i>character's disability very linked to storyline</i>	<i>character displays marked growth and development during the course of the story</i>	<i>character establishes relationships which are meaningful to another character and to self</i>	<i>readers have many opportunities to identify with character</i>

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