

The Disregard of Disability– Its Representation Through Literature

The truth about disability, in particular regards to its portrayal in English literature; exploited and explained through an interview with Dr. Rogers.

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As an incoming freshman here at the College, still recovering from extensive reparative shoulder surgery, I was very nervous. Given the state of my body and, furthermore, the state of my diagnoses, I did not know how my education would impact my well-being.

"Here are my terms," my British Literature professor, Dr. Rogers, began to say as she initiated the circumstances of her classroom on my second day of college. "This is a safe space." She asserted, right away.

She told us about our assignments and their deadlines, but, most importantly, she repeatedly expressed sympathy for students. She acknowledged our struggles and how they may affect us in and outside of the classroom. She made it clear to me that she valued not just who we were as students, but also who we were as people and who we'd become.



I felt a layer of comfort; a feeling of warmth came over my being, like the warmth of a blanket. I knew I was exactly where I needed to be. For the first time in a long time, I felt relief. I knew everything would be okay. I have never had a professor create such a welcoming, open, even, free environment in their classroom. With Dr. Rogers, I felt nothing but security; security in the classroom, security in the knowledge, strategies, and considerations of my professor. Security in the safety I had just found at the College of Charleston.

Dr. Kathleen Béres Rogers has been working as a professor for the College of Charleston's English Department for the past 17 years. She is also a faculty affiliate with the Department of Women and Gender Studies and a member of our Women's Health Research Team. During her time at the College, she has designed and continues to direct the College's Program in Medical Humanities. Along

with these outstanding contributions, she has also implemented the College's Neurodiversity Initiative, which now serves as a student group.

When asked during our interview about the circumstances that prompted her to create such an inspiring and inclusive program, she told me about a conference she had attended with her colleagues a while back. She explained that other professors at the conference from differing universities mentioned that they had displayed the art of neurodivergent students, embodying what illness truthfully meant to them.

"I thought it would be amazing to have something like that at COFC." She said, "We kind of started with that; that's actually the first thing we did, and it was at the Stern Center."

I asked her to pinpoint her sources of inspiration regarding this topic in particular. I wanted to know what had motivated her interest in the field of disability studies; it did not take her long to come up with two primary driving forces in her life.

"The first reason would be the birth of Julia." She began to say. Her tone grew softer, and I noticed a layer of warmth encapsulating her presence as she began to speak about her daughter. "She has Down Syndrome, and that made me think a lot about the ways that we don't accommodate people with differences in our society." She answered. "I got to see a lot of that firsthand."

Dr. Rogers sighed and took a breath before she began talking about a former colleague of hers; the second reason for the pursuit of her passion. "She also had a daughter with Down syndrome," she exclaimed, "She worked a lot on disability studies, and sadly, she passed away…" She took a moment again before she told me that she wanted to carry on the legacy of her colleague; to continue her work, here, in her honor. She told me their daughters still remain close friends.

In light of my interest in this topic, Dr. Rogers allowed me to join her Narratives of Illness class for a period. Her students were reading the book, "The Story of Beautiful Girl" by Rachel Simon. They were split into groups to discuss different elements of works that embody disability. One of the core concepts mentioned happened to be the aspect of narrative prosthetics, or characters with a disability that

serve simply as a plot device to move the story along. When asked about common stereotypes surrounding disability in literary works, Dr. Rogers eagerly elaborated more on this objective.

“A really good example is Tiny Tim,” she said, referencing the character from the famous work of Charles Dickens known as “A Christmas Carol.” We had touched on this in British Literature last semester.

“He doesn't have his own lived experience; he's like a flat character.” She acknowledged that his only truthful purpose in the story is to gain sympathy from the viewers.

“In a lot of works of literature you see that… even in mainstream media.” She continued, explaining, "Main characters in TV shows or movies are so often the object of pity, you know? Not an object for charity.”

She’s right. Often, those with disabilities are depicted in the media through metaphors, which can simply serve to keep the story flowing and entertain the intended audience. The portrayal of these characters often shows no regard for the community of which they are “representing”.

“They're compared to animals sometimes.” Drawing on yet another concept she talked about in class, Dr. Rogers explains the insensitivity of animal imagery; that those who are disabled can be portrayed as animals through the media, stripping their characters of all means of humanistic qualities. We agreed that this was deceitful and cruel. It furthermore enhanced the “inhumane” and/or “abnormal” stereotypes surrounding people with disabilities.

I then asked Dr. Rogers if she could name any specific literary moments or periods that were influential in shaping the portrayal of disability. Tying together all previously mentioned elements of literature, she responded, explaining, “Romanticism. Is interesting to me because the time period occurred before these terms were actually coined.” She says, regarding terms like “the norm.” “I would say the 1850s, or when the rise of statistics, the rise of a lot of these scientific categorizations that we now have happened sort of in the mid-19th century.” She glossed over the Eugenics movement, as she also did in class, emphasizing its importance in shaping the foundations of this subject.

Listing some limitations and/or challenges in studying disability in English literature, Dr. Rogers continued to make a well-rounded, remarkable point during our interview, saying, “Disability studies in general tend to be really about physical disability… People have done work on mental disability, meaning what we call mental illness. People with cognitive disabilities often don't have a normative language to write down their public story. Sometimes, they don’t have the ability to tell their own stories–” Expressing her personal troubles within navigating this field, she continues, “Part of the difficulty for me is really trying to respect people's lived experiences instead of assuming that I understand because I'm reading a piece of literature, which often depicts them as a metaphor anyway.”

Despite the constraints surrounding the study of disability and its portrayal in literature, I find a promising glimpse of light for the future of this field. Educators like Kathleen Béres Rogers are essential to teaching the next generation. It is those with compassion, those with empathy, those who are willing to care beyond the surface that have the power to truthfully make a difference in today’s world. Carrying herself with such warmth and wisdom whilst reflecting the same onto her students, Dr. Rogers plays a remarkable role in instilling inclusivity, acceptance, and gratitude in the community here at the College of Charleston.