Disability, “Fiction for Girls,” and the Reluctant Twentieth Century

This paper examines how popular fiction, particularly fiction written for girls, contributes to an understanding of the early disciplinary formation of Disability Studies in the first half of the twentieth century. It traces the field’s emergence from the shadow of influential nineteenth-century texts such as Susan Coolidge’s Katy books of the 1870s and Johanna Spyri’s Heidi (1880–1881), both of which centre on narratives of temporary orthopaedic disability that are ultimately resolved through moral growth and physical recovery. These earlier works established powerful conventions in which disability functioned as a narrative device for socialisation, discipline, and redemption, shaping young readers’ attitudes toward bodily difference, dependency, and moral worth. As the twentieth century unfolds, popular fiction begins to renegotiate these conventions, moving gradually away from purely redemptive models and towards more complex engagements with disability as a social and psychological condition rather than a temporary obstacle to be overcome.

The paper goes on to explore how these evolving representations redefine the socialising, punitive, and redemptive dimensions of disability, particularly as they begin to intersect with questions of mental challenge, intelligence, and emotional difference. The focus of this study is Elinor Brent-Dyer’s long-running Chalet School series, which offers a rich and sustained engagement with disability across several decades. Through close readings of Eustacia Goes to the Chalet School (1930), Jo to the Rescue (1945), and Trials for the Chalet School (1959), the paper analyses how disability is woven into narratives of friendship, education, discipline, and belonging. These texts repeatedly ask how young readers are conditioned to understand the relationship between disability and social relationships, disability and exceptional ability or genius, and disability and illness, often blurring the boundaries between physical impairment, psychological distress, and moral character.

Finally, the paper considers whether ‘the modern’ arrives decisively in these texts or whether it emerges hesitantly and unevenly. Rather than marking a clear break with earlier traditions, the Chalet School books often appear to shuffle reluctantly towards modern understandings of disability, carrying forward older moral frameworks even as they tentatively gesture towards more social and relational models. From a contemporary perspective, such representations may appear politically and culturally problematic. Yet for generations of readers encountering these revised conduct books for the first time, they played a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward difference, care, and normality. In this sense, the paper argues that these texts signal a troubled and troubling evolution of ideas that would only much later be articulated as Disability Studies.