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Tanja Aho, Grit Alter

Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies, Volume 12, Issue 3, 2018,  
pp. 303-319 (Article)

Published by Liverpool University Press



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# “Just Like Me, Just Like You”

## Narrative Erasure as Disability Normalization in Children’s Picture Books

Tanja Aho and Grit Alter

University at Buffalo / University of Innsbruck

The article analyzes contemporary representations of disability in children’s picture books that elide visual markers of difference in the name of inclusion. Based on detailed readings of the picture books *Susan Laughs* (Willis) and *My Pal, Victor/Mi Amigo, Víctor* (Bertrand) from a media literacy perspective, the argument is that a potentially productive inclusion of characters with disabilities can lead to their narrative erasure by constructing the disability as an individualized problem that needs to be hidden. This narrative erasure and individualization of disability is also prevalent in pedagogical texts including current English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks in Germany, where disability is only superficially engaged. The investigation of online commentaries confirms that the promotion, circulation, and reception of children’s picture books remains strongly embedded in an ableist framework that manifests in “special needs” language use, inclusion discourses, and overcoming narratives. Contrasting these two picture books to *No Fair to Tigers/No Es Justo Para los Tigres* (Hoffman), the article encourages a DisCrit discourse about picture books that juxtaposes individualized readings of disability with narratives about disabling societal structures that do not shun depicting the lived reality of impairment.

### Introduction

While the field of disability studies has expanded its analyses of representations of disability over the past decades, education studies is oftentimes still entrenched in classical special education discourses, even if these are accompanied today by calls for inclusion and respect for diversity. In this article, we offer a synthesis for these divergent traditions, bringing together our work in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) studies (Grit Alter), and cultural and literary studies (Tanja Aho). We thus address not only the representation of disability in children’s picture books, but do so from a pedagogical perspective that is equally concerned with the production, circulation, and reception of ideas about disability in classrooms and online. Given the importance of picture books as one conduit through which youth are exposed to social ideas about disability, we hope to see much more engagement with them by disability studies and education studies scholars alike.

The representation of disability in children's picture books has long followed the classical tradition of using disabled characters in supporting roles and as foils that reinforce ableist dichotomies central to Western understandings of human worth under patriarchal, racial capitalism. Typically, disabled characters in children's picture books have been othered, stereotyped as extraordinary, served as sidekicks, played the role of outsider, have lacked realism and accuracy and have rarely been allowed happy endings (Brittain). More recently, children's picture books have moved from depicting disability as "an inexorably marginalized, disempowered cultural signifier" (Pollard 264) to what we call a narrative erasure of disability, in an attempt, quite ironically, to prime children to better respect difference. In a number of these books, disability is omitted from both the verbal and visual text until the very end of the book, where a specific impairment is revealed. The message of this final plot twist belabors the idea that despite this newly revealed difference, the child in question can still be considered similar enough to be included and liked, following the classical schema of "narrative prosthesis" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*), in which "the incomplete body [is returned] to the invisible status of a normative essence" (8). The erasure of disability thus comes to reinforce the traditional ableist binary of sameness/difference that has long served to legitimate structures of exclusion and discrimination. As Hughes pointedly asks, do authors who use narrative erasure "better communicate tolerance and inclusion, or have they fallen into the trap of hiding disability? Worse, have they inadvertently reinforced societal discomfort about [disability]?" (46). In the following, we offer a close reading of such moments of narrative erasure, as well as an exploration of the ways in which these texts and their multimodal meanings circulate and are reinforced, repurposed, and sometimes challenged.

We end this article by discussing a contemporary picture book that resists the ableist demands of normalization and instead "expand[s] on the quirkiness of our forms and [...] cultivate[s] the interesting styles that such bodies can produce" (Linton 521). Even though they remain exceptions themselves, picture books such as *No Fair to Tigers/No Es Justo Para los Tigres* (Hoffman) reimagine disability while remaining mindful of the lived experience of disability in an ableist world. As Pollard emphasizes, "turning normative aesthetics and expectations on their heads is the radical work of disability studies scholarship, providing us with a fruitful intellectual ground for new ways of reading—and teaching—literature" (265). We thus highlight picture books that can do the work of creatively challenging ableist normalization through a recalibration of ideas about disability that engage a "politics of

wonder” (Titchkosky 129–50). Writing and teaching children’s picture books from the perspective of “growing sideways” (Stockton), we can do much more than challenge stereotypes, ask for inclusion, and celebrate diversity. Crippling children’s picture books means starting from a place in which difference does not register as a disciplinary technique, where diversity and inclusion are not smoke screens for “a rationally inevitable normative system that merely sorts human beings into categories of difference” (Melamed 2). Even if such picture books are not yet common, our insights can serve to encourage a social environment in which disability is not seen as something to be overcome, to be praised as exceptional, or to be tolerated, but instead serves to challenge ableist norms and structures of exclusion, oppression, and dispossession. Following DisCrit theory in education studies, we call for “a willingness to deconstruct the systems that would keep those bodies in separate spheres” (Bell 3) and offer another angle and medium through which “to reveal what has been, to date, missed, dismissed, hidden, or purposefully unacknowledged within educational research” (Connor et al. 29). This gap can be filled by reading the interplay of verbal and visual text in picture books critically and deconstructing the positioning of disabled characters beyond a merely inclusive portrayal.

### **Narrative Erasure of Disability in *Susan Laughs* and *My Pal, Victor/Mi Amigo, Víctor***

We focus on children’s picture books whose protagonists are wheelchair users, since we did not want to erase the specificity of other disabilities in generalizing about the visual representation of disability. We want to acknowledge the ongoing conversation in disability studies about the symbolic dominance of wheelchair-use to represent disability experiences (cf. Fritsch), and concede that our article in some ways reinforces that centrality. And yet, because of the ubiquity with which wheelchair use comes to stand in for any disability experience, its presence in children’s picture books can be analyzed in regards to the manifold ways in which it is centralized. We believe there is value in such an analysis precisely because of its hegemonic symbolism. In the same sense, we acknowledge that the majority of children with disabilities in children’s picture books are white (cf. Leininger et al.). While one of the three primary texts analyzed in this article centers Latino children, *My Pal, Victor/Mi Amigo, Víctor* (Bertrand) does so only on the visual level through images that depict Mexican pyramids and more generally through the physical appearance of the two children. The bilingual version furthermore offers linguistic diversity, but

as Naidoo and Ladd note, Latinx culture is downplayed—just like disability—in order to emphasize the level of sameness that is indirectly posited as a qualifier for inclusion.

The picture books *Susan Laughs* (Willis) and *My Pal, Victor* are telling examples of how a potentially productive inclusion of characters with disabilities can ultimately lead to their narrative erasure. Susan is presented as a member of a loving and supportive family with whom she shares happy moments, and with whom she can also be angry and weak. Victor and his friend enjoy daily adventures together. Their mutual happiness is based on an interdependence of child and caregivers which challenges an objectification of the child with a disability. They are not ridiculed, pitied, marginalized, “cured,” or killed, as is often the case in literature that includes a character with a disability (Emmerson; Leiniger et al.; Mellon). Instead, Susan and Victor are round characters who are allowed a range of emotions and activities, they do not have to prove themselves worthy of attention and affection which stands in stark contrast to earlier representations of disabled children that used to serve only as flat characters, sidekicks, or foils (cf. Biklen and Bogdan; Irwin and Moeller; Mellon; Prater “Characterization”; Prater and Dyches). Although studies about the representation of disability in children’s literature emphasize that images of people with disabilities have improved, their overall representation is far from equal and balanced (Hughes; Leiniger et al.; Prater “Learning”). As Dyches et al. aptly summarize the continuing under- and misrepresentation of disabilities, “books that meet both the high standards for juvenile literature and high standards for the portrayal of disabilities are rare” (305). *Susan Laughs* and *My Pal, Victor*, however, focus on what the children have and not on what they lack (cf. Aveling); they do not need to go through a “School of Pain” (Dowker). A potential message of these books could be that if these children can make the best of their situations, as described in the books, so can everyone else. After all, there is no need for Susan or Victor to change who they are.

Both picture books attempt to portray children with disabilities as participating in “normal” activities, but by doing so they deny the lived reality of disability. This happens through two stylistic devices: first, on the visual level, mobility devices, such as wheelchairs, crutches, and in the case of Victor, his legs, are eliminated from all images until the final page, supposedly to emphasize sameness, but which ultimately reinforces an individualized understanding of disability that can even be understood as a shaming of difference. Second, on the narrative level, the disabled protagonist too often remains voiceless in the story whose actions are described, and, in the case of

Victor, filtered through the non-disabled protagonist's perspective. This not only solidifies ableist notions of lacking agency and voice, but also speaks to the intended audience's assumed status as non-disabled.

In both books, the disabled children's wheelchairs are erased from the book and only shown on the very last spread. This surprise is particularly effective in *Susan Laughs*, because throughout the book, readers see Susan's entire body depicted, there is no verbal or visual indication that she is a wheelchair user until the final page. Finishing the book, the reader may wonder how the different activities were possible for Susan. The illustrations show that she has a supportive family and community as she swings with the help of a friend or dances on her grandfather's feet. One might thus argue that *Susan Laughs* encourages ideas of interdependence, and certainly challenges stereotypes of children using wheelchairs as immobile and excluded from most "normal" children's activities. And yet, the omission of the lived reality of using mobility devices reinforces ableist norms about human worth, the "textual prosthesis alleviat[ing] discomfort by removing the unsightly from view" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 8).

*My Pal, Victor* follows a similar narrative strategy, but additionally eliminates Victor's legs from almost all but the last image. A dog or blankets, for example, are used to make his legs invisible, as if they were the sole bearer of his disability. By eliminating the wheelchair and only showing it when the close friendship between the boys is established, the author and illustrator turn the regular friendship into an exceptional one. Victor is thus not permitted "normalization, pride, or empowerment" (Meyer 269) for his own sake but is depicted as a source of entertainment. For example, Victor is the one who accompanies his abled-bodied friend to baseball games and to a theme park. In all of these episodes, we do not learn how Victor actually experiences these activities, but only how much his friend gains from his friendship to Victor and enjoys the free time they spend together.

Disability is erased and its revelation serves to reinforce the ableist desire for normality that these books purportedly challenge. By excluding the wheelchair from the verbal and visual text, the authors and illustrators of both books implicitly shame mobility devices and the lived experience of disability. As Hughes observes for the omission of blindness in children's picture books, such erasure posits disability as "something unutterable, shameful or dangerous" (46). The attention in both stories lies with the protagonists until the very last page when the focus becomes disability. Yet, if both children are as "normal" as they can be, the wheelchair or any indication of diversity would have been present throughout the book and the social union of disabled child and

family and friends would still be productive and functional. Uncovering the wheelchair only at the end of the book turns disability into a spectacle and the mobility device into a shameful object to be hidden. It infers the answer to “questions such as how do I know disability to be a problem and how does this conception of what is a problem organize my perception of disability?” (Titchkosky 134) by suggesting that disabled children can be liked despite their mobility devices.

Not only are the wheelchairs and the children’s disabilities de-scribed from the text, in a second stylistic device that denies the lived reality of disability the protagonists are also de-voiced. Despite labeling the books with their names, Susan and Victor are discursively located in inferior positions as both do not speak themselves, but are spoken for and about. Susan does not describe activities and feelings herself, but an omniscient narrator ascribes these to her. The reader only finds two-word phrases such as “Susan laughs, Susan sings, Susan flies, Susan swings” (Willis opening 1 and 2) underneath each illustration. Thus, the process of her communicative agency, which is closely related to processes of establishing identity, is weakened. Being de-voiced also means that she is disempowered, which “render[s her] invisible. To be recognized is to be visible; to be misrecognized or not recognized is to be rendered invisible” (Oliver 11).

Victor is similarly de-voiced: his friend Dominic functions as the narrator of the book. Although we are told Victor tells jokes and ghost stories, he himself does not speak, but is spoken about. Such objectification is also revealed in the grammatical structure of the book’s title. Dominic is constructed as the able-bodied narrator who has the power to tell the story about his friendship to Victor, and deprives him of the right to speak for himself. A book about a mutual friendship between two boys thus becomes a story about an able-bodied child and how he benefits from the disabled child and his imagination, encouragement, and loyalty. This narrative and grammatical structure unveils a surprising imbalance of putting the character into focus on the one hand while simultaneously limiting their space of action and presence in regard to the visual and verbal(ized) construction of normality.

Both stylistic strategies—disability as spectacle and de-voicing disabled protagonists—ultimately speak to the question of intended audience. The last sentences of both books subtly recenter able-bodied readers. *Susan Laughs* ends with “That is Susan through and through—just like me, just like you” (opening 13), positioning the narrator, “me,” and readers, “you,” on one side and Susan on the other, cultivating a strong didactic message that readers need to be convinced that wheelchair users are no different than themselves,

thus assuming that the majority of the readership is able-bodied. What is more, the text uses the reader as a point of reference when it says that Susan is like the narrator/reader. Certainly, children in wheelchairs may feel proud and gain self-esteem when they see themselves represented in literature as complex characters, even when only at the very end of the narrative. Yet, if we look closely, the moral and ethical message mainly relates to the children without disabilities in whom educators assume they will need to develop more respectful attitudes. The able-bodied child develops empathy for the disabled child who remains the object of respect and tolerance. Instead of challenging the many ways in which social norms produce disablement, revealing the wheelchair on the final spread and assuming that Susan is just like able-bodied readers, reinscribes an individualized understanding of disability that is solely constituted through one's physical properties. Erasing an important part of a disabled child's lived reality—mobility devices, inaccessible spaces, and social and institutionalized barriers—might be seen as beneficial for a non-disabled readership that is considered as in need of convincing of the human worth of disabled children based on their similarity to non-disabled children. It certainly does not contribute to a challenging of ableist thinking about difference.

### **Effects and Benefits of Inclusive School Cultures**

Given current attempts of implementing inclusive schooling in public schools in Germany and Austria, picture books with disabled protagonists are widely considered productive tools to develop awareness of and respect toward difference. Such picture books contribute to a child's emotional development because they find access to various human experiences through which they can reflect on their own struggles and find solace and courage, building empathy and understanding in the process (Hughes 39). According to Prater and Dyches, children's literature that portrays characters with disabilities helps children become aware and understand their peers with disabilities and themselves (17). It is through education at a young age that teachers can work against already established negative stereotypes about people with disabilities. This remains an important project because society still stigmatizes individuals with disabilities.

As a general goal of inclusive education, students should learn to understand that disability is "the attribution of corporeal deviance—not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do" (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 6). In order to avoid

tokenizing people with disabilities, it is essential that school and classroom libraries in principle include children's fiction and nonfiction about characters with disabilities so that students and teachers can access these. Reflecting on impairment and disability can be highly productive in EFL classrooms because research has shown that learning a second language opens up different linguistic contexts to learners, which allows "them to access a wider range of emotional responses than either language alone would do" (Wilson 299). As Wilson's research suggests, students feel more self-assured and secure, and they become more curious and receptive to new ways of thinking when speaking and learning a foreign language, as long as this happens in a context where the new language has not been imposed upon them. Therefore, representing protagonists with impairments when teaching EFL may invite students to reflect more openly about disability. However, this is only possible when appropriate teaching material is available. We argue that picture books are a beneficial medium because people with disabilities are only marginally represented in textbooks and are tokenized rather than included. As these books can also be read without the verbal text, they are particularly suited for language learners and readers with emergent literacy skills.

Several textbooks for teaching EFL, such as *Camden Market 1* and *2* (Börner and Edelhoff) and *Orange Line 1* (Haß), include a wheelchair-using protagonist, but only in *Camden Market 1* and *2* is the wheelchair user, Karla, part of the continuing textbook characters. Even so, in *Camden Market 1*, Karla only appears in selected contexts. She is included in an exercise spelling her name and in a picture of the classroom. Although Karla is not depicted encountering any barrier moments, much of the socializing events are reserved for the able-bodied peers, as she is excluded from units on birthday parties, free time activities, at home, and at school. In *Camden Market 2*, Karla has a more central role when she is given space to introduce herself (her list of self-identifications includes age, family, hobbies, and her status as a wheelchair user) and is included in topics such as future plans, favorite celebrities, parties, Christmas, and weekend plans. In the unit "Let's Go" Karla is shown on the topic page and her character role is expanded. However, narratives in *Orange Line 1* and parallel textbooks for other school types from the same series continue to reproduce ableist scenarios that are not further problematized. For example, wheelchair user Rachel and her family run Highfield Farm, to which the central group of characters goes on a class trip (Haß 120–21). When a sheep goes missing, Rachel explains the GPS tracking on the sheep's collar to the other children, who set off to put Rachel's plan into action. The textbook narrates that "[t]hey all walked to the river" (121), but in actuality Rachel is left

behind. “All” here refers to the able-bodied children, eliding the exclusion of Rachel from the activity. Apart from these few depictions, impairment and disability are not engaged with in EFL textbooks at all.

Using picture books that represent impairment and disability can be one means to work toward inclusive classrooms. For younger learners it can be beneficial to use a topical approach to texts featuring disabled protagonists. Teachers can ask explorative questions regarding friendship and family life, and have students engage with the protagonists’ and their own feelings. Advanced learners can engage with picture books critically by questioning the construction of plot and protagonists, agency, and voice. This critical assessment of the content that media provides develops their critical media literacy (Grigoryan and King 2; Volkmann 216–21). As discussed in detail above, unveiling narrative erasure allows students to challenge how far these picture books represent political empowerment of characters with disabilities. Uncovering the twist in both stories that turns children into objects of spectacle, they can gain insights into the discursive positioning of both protagonists’ impairment as a disability (McMaster 14). Such reading of verbal and visual texts through a critical disability studies lens can then be applied to further texts that include people with stigmatized identity markers, such as gender and sexuality, ability, race, class, and age.

Beyond actual classroom practice, it is essential to broaden the perspective from classroom settings to whole school cultures. An “inclusive school community [which] involves a transformation in education and schools” (McMaster 14) can create school systems that are fully able to accommodate students with disabilities (cf. Goodley). When McMaster demands that it is necessary to “create a school community that is free of barriers which would lead to meaningful participation” (13), children’s literature could be one means of breaking down such barriers. Yet, including representations of disability in teaching material can only be one small change toward inclusion in school.

Lack of adequate professional development for teachers and inadequate material and human resources in schools stand in the way of successful inclusive school environments (Feyerer; Hughes 49; Schönwiese). Additionally, the very implementation of political mandates for inclusion in Germany and Austria is anything but satisfactory (Blanck; Powell et al.): in Germany, for example, where education is not controlled federally but on a state level, the implementation of inclusive school policies has varied widely. What most of the schools have in common, though, is a “labelling-resource-dilemma,” in which resources for inclusive teaching are ascribed to schools according to the students who officially qualify for “special needs” education (Sturm 115–16). If students attend

inclusive schools, they are entitled to special personnel who accompany them and in most of the cases separate them from the rest of the class. Therefore, Feyerer calls this school system segregative in its very foundation. This means that inclusion is not seen as an overall educational principle but dependent on single students, which supports seeing disability as an individualized condition (cf. Baglieri). The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on which national programs are based, however, does not intend this (cf. Feyerer). More importantly, this understanding has been highly contested in disability studies research: disability is not “an individual defect but [...] the product of social injustice, one that requires not the cure or elimination of the defective person but significant changes in the social and built environment” (Siebers). Political, educational, and practical approaches to inclusive education need continuously and critically to reflect concrete implementations of measures in order to do justice to all children, truly referring to all and not only those who fall under a certain definition of “special needs.”

### **Ableism, Inclusion, and Audience: Reception and Circulation of Picture Books**

While classrooms constitute a major cultural space in which notions of normality and deviance are oftentimes scripted, performed, and reinforced vis-à-vis children’s picture books and textbooks, they find circulation in other cultural contexts as well, from book awards to web 2.0 communities and blogs. These cultural sites of meaning making offer yet another way to engage the question of how depictions of disability in children’s literature are articulated to notions of heteronormativity and able-nationalist paradigms of human worth (Mitchell and Snyder, *Biopolitics of Disability*). In the following, we offer a short overview of these sites and practices as they pertain to the representation of disability in children’s picture books to highlight the various channels through which normative notions of inclusion and diversity are circulated.

Online commentary, as Hall and O’Shea note, remains an underutilized primary source of cultural notions of human worth (16–17), and while its particularities challenge traditional notions of reliability, authorial intention, and continuity, these online comments, blog posts, and reviews offer cultural critics productive sites of meaning making that can be brought into conversation with other discursive spaces. The children’s books discussed throughout this article may not have garnered much attention from scholars so far, but they have certainly been extensively reviewed online, by presses, readers, and

disability advocates and organizations. Various narratives emerge: from the popular inspiration narrative to more critical takes on the erasure of disability, online comments offer a breadth of perspectives, including of course those by people with disabilities themselves.

Generally, the promotion, circulation, and reception of children's picture books remains strongly embedded in an ableist framework that manifests in "special needs" language use, inclusion discourses, and overcoming narratives. Presses and authors are among the first to shape and reproduce a hermeneutical framework for children's picture books, which are in turn adapted and circulated by reviewers, bloggers, and other online reader comments, as well as librarians, teachers, and university instructors in education programs. Based on our review of all reader comments for *Susan Laughs* and *My Pal, Victor* on Amazon and GoodReads, two of the top online sites for reader feedback, we argue that these sites serve as important discursive spaces in which disability remains largely constructed as an individualized condition. Mirroring contemporary inclusion and diversity discourses in the classroom, most reader comments focus on the importance of accepting difference without considering the concomitant recentering of able-bodied normality that such statements perform.

Macmillan, the publisher of *Susan Laughs*, frames its conceptualization of disability through the well-worn trope of individualized handicap: "Told with insight, and without sentimentality, here is an inspiring look at one spunky little girl whose physical disability is never seen as a handicap." In Macmillan's ableist framing, in which, as the book inlay tellingly describes it, Susan's disability is described as "physical challenges," disability is not only individualized, but its experience is framed as inspirational, the ethics of which disability activists and scholars have challenged as "inspiration porn" (Young; cf. Ellis 139–58). Furthermore, Macmillan's phrasing suggests that while physical disability is never "*seen* as a handicap" (italics ours), it might very well be considered one. The understanding of disability remains disablist, even if it is framed through inclusion and acceptance discourses. In contrast to picture books like *No Fair to Tigers*, in which the socially disabling environment plays a central role in the experience of disability (cf. conclusion), *Susan Laughs* cannot help but reinforce an individualized understanding of disability that its publisher and author confirm.

Individualizing disability is one way in which the promotion of children's picture books speaks to the pervasiveness of the medical model in inclusion discourses, which continue to situate the "problem" in the physical impairment. On her professional website, the author of *Susan Laughs*, Willis, states:

“Children will enjoy seeing their common feelings and experiences. They’ll be surprised by that wheelchair at the end; and they’ll accept their connection with the child who they’ve come to know is ‘just like me.’” Acceptance here is premised on the need for an initial perception of sameness—and the erasure of difference that in reality is impossible. Furthermore, the disabled child is not “just like me”; for children using wheelchairs, their mobility devices do play an important role in their daily lives, especially given our inaccessible life worlds. Most importantly, Willis’s comment reveals an unspoken assumption about the supposedly non-disabled audience of this book, which finds continuation in most reader comments as well.

Very few online comments about *Susan Laughs* actually consider disabled readers; for the most part, reviewers focus on the effect this book will have on a non-disabled audience, lauding how it “promote[s] the tolerance and understanding of human individualities” (Reedy in GoodReads, n.pag.). Once disability has been posited as an individual trait that is to be respected but certainly never desired, its bearer can be considered for inclusion if they fulfill certain requirements. Most prominently, the disabled character has to evince characteristics of sameness, but equally importantly, should be “spunky” (cf. Macmillan above), or, in other words, should not trouble the non-disabled reader’s romanticized investment in overcoming narratives and inspiration discourses. As most reader comments evidence, children’s picture books such as *Susan Laughs* are ultimately read as didactic tools meant to encourage non-disabled children of the importance of inclusion. As Reedy states in her review on GoodReads: “Focussing on Susan’s abilities and her strengths as opposed to her limitations makes this a wonderful book for encouraging the acceptance of diversity” (n.pag.). Ultimately, such comments speak to the recentering of non-disabled subjects in inclusion discourses, despite the book’s supposed focus on a disabled protagonist.

We would however like to note that given the profoundly disablist nature of our societies, such inclusion discourses remain consequential projects despite their epistemological flaws. As an anonymous Amazon customer with cerebral palsy points out in their review of *Susan Laughs*, given the pigeon-holing of disabled people in many societies, any text that attempts to represent disabled characters as not just strange curiosities in need of special treatment is already a vast improvement. As most children’s picture books imply that “disability is a foreign thing or something wrong that must be given charity” (Amazon customer, n.pag.), books such as *Susan Laughs* and *My Pal, Victor* do contribute in important ways to a reconceptualization of disability. And yet, as long as these projects remain couched in inclusion discourses that individualize

disability, they will remain only partially successful. As one of the few critical reviewers of *Susan Laughs* points out, de-scribing disability from picture books “seem[s] a little deceptive,” since “under normal circumstances [the] wheelchair probably should have been visible in several of these situations, so it feels more like they were actually hiding it” (Meltha in GoodReads, n.pag.). Omitting crucial components of the lived reality of disability, including mobility devices, as well as the inaccessibility of the built environment, does not “motivate disabled children that they can do the same things as their able bodied classmates” (Fowle in GoodReads, n.pag.). Instead of encouraging children to consider how disabling our environments can be, it reinscribes the centrality of normalized activities and the necessity of participating in them in order to be accepted and included. Reviewers time and again harp on the importance of that last line of *Susan Laughs*: “the book really emphasises the message that disabled children are just the same as anyone else” (Fowle in GoodReads, n.pag.). But, as disabled children know, they are not always “just like you,” and denying disabled children representations that cover the full spectrum of experiences they face in order to make inclusion more palatable for non-disabled children is a highly limiting project.

## Conclusion

In *No Fair to Tigers/No Es Justo Para los Tigres*, Mandy is occupied with caring for her stuffed animal tiger. She washes him with the help of her father, sews his ear and tail back on together with her brother, and goes to the pet store to buy him food with her sister Allie. From the first spread on the reader is presented with a visual narrative about Mandy’s wheelchair use, which becomes integrated into the verbal narrative once the children reach the store. Here, Mandy faces the quotidian manifestation of an ableist world: three steps keep her from entering the store, and there is no ramp. Allie gets the store owner to come outside, since Mandy dislikes “being picked up like a puppy dog” (opening 8), and Mandy informs him that he should have a ramp if he would like her to return. The exchange is friendly, but Mandy is self-assured in asking for an accessible environment. The story ends in typical fashion with Mandy returning home and going to bed with her pet tiger, tucked in by her mother. At the end of the book, “A Note to Parents, Teachers, and Other Caregivers” provides contextualization and reading exercises. Central to the suggestions are notions of caregiving, including pets, animals, and humans, and the issue of accessibility. The last exercise suggests interviewing or discussing people with

disabilities by focusing on their interests, jobs, families, and for whom they care. These exercises provide an example of how disability can and should be engaged in lesson plans and beyond. In this book, “[d]isability is not merely a word to be added into the chain of our existence; it is not the et cetera clause of identity politics” (Titchkosky 149). As part of a series of “Anti-Bias Books for Kids,” *No Fair to Tigers* resists individualizing disability scripts. It neither erases disability nor portrays it as something to be pitied or overcome. It questions normative notions of human worth and “invents and reinvents the world we share” (Garland-Thomson, “Disability and Representation” 523) by offering a narrative focused on interdependence that values various types of care work and community building. Children’s picture books such as *No Fair to Tigers* can crip ableist notions of human worth and help children imagine otherwise.

In the spirit of Titchkosky’s “politics of wonder,” we want to close with this picture book that crip narratives of disability in order “to anticipate presents and to imagine futures that include all of us,” in order to resist, as Kafer puts it, “disabled people continually being written out of the future, rendered as the sign of the future no one wants” (46). Readers can critically engage with such a positioning when approaching picture books from a media literacy perspective which encourages them to reflect upon protagonists’ characterization and their agency. Children’s picture books can contribute to an idea of the future that “allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise” (Butler 29), and the political work that these texts and their reception perform—in the EFL classroom, at home, at the library, and online—are essential sites for notions of human worth. Clearly, there is a need for many more such picture books to be written since, as Hughes predicts, “engaging children in reading the world and reading themselves within these books will ultimately help them challenge ableism” (47). Even though such picture books remain few and far between, we believe it is important to note the existence and work that crip picture books are already doing.

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