



**Fairytales, Disabilities and Social Consciousness: Readings in
Amanda Leduc's *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space***

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Abstract

In this paper, the focus is on the study of representation of disabilities in fairytales vis-à-vis an in-depth study of Amanda Leduc's *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space* (2020), and how the representation shapes and affects our social consciousness about people with difficulties. In *Disfigured*, Amanda Leduc describes her life with cerebral palsy and her obsession with fairytales that began at an early age and continues today. Amanda describes of being both drawn to and repulsed by fairytales, aching for those happily ever afters and slowly realising how problematic those endings in fairytales are. By examining the ways that fairy tales have shaped our expectations of disability, Leduc emphasises the need for a new world order where disability is no longer a punishment or impediment but operates, instead, as a way of centering a protagonist or person and helping him/her to cement a place in a story, and from there, the world. Through the book, she ruminates on the connections we make between fairy tale archetypes, and tries to make sense of them through a twenty-first-century disablist lens.

Keywords: Disability Studies, Fairytales, Representation, Literature, Children Literature

Disability is the subject of growing research in varied areas of research such as sociology, anthropology, and comparative literature among others. Although disability studies are now a part of studies in disciplines as sociology and medical anthropology, little attention has been paid toward situating disability within a “politicised, social constructionist perspective” (“Extraordinary Bodies” 15-16). Disabilities had long been studied from a strictly medical standpoint. Nevertheless, over the past three decades those “over-medicalised and individualist accounts of disability” (*The Social Model of Disability* 214) have been challenged by disability rights activists who worked to replace the medical model of disability with the social one.

According to the social model of disability, “society is constructed by people with capabilities for people with capabilities and it is this that makes people with impairments incapable of functioning” (*The Social Model of Disability Repossessed* 2). In other words, it is society that disables impaired people by employing such measures as inaccessible public spaces, lack of financial support or segregated schooling, among others, that exclude and isolate people with disabilities and make them feel lesser than others. Disability is, in fact, a social construct which portrays people with disabilities as “the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 6). In consequence, people with disabilities are often stigmatised, ridiculed, and discriminated against by able-bodied people. In this paper, the focus is on the study of representation of disabilities in fairytales vis-à-vis an in-depth study of Amanda Leduc’s *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space* (2020), and how the representation shapes and affects our social consciousness about people with difficulties. In *Disfigured*, Amanda Leduc describes her life with cerebral palsy and her obsession with fairytales that began at an early age and continues today. Amanda describes of being both drawn to and repulsed by fairytales, aching for those happily ever afters and slowly realising how problematic those endings in fairytales are.

By examining the ways that fairy tales have shaped our expectations of disability, Leduc emphasises the need for a new world order where disability is no longer a punishment or impediment but operates, instead, as a way of centering a protagonist or person and helping them to cement their own place in a story, and from there, the world. Through the book, she ruminates on the connections we make between fairy tale archetypes—the beautiful princess, the glass slipper, the maiden with long hair lost in the tower—and tries to make sense of them through a twenty-first-century disablist lens. From examinations of disability in tales from the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen through to modern interpretations ranging from Disney to Angela Carter, and the fight for disabled representation in today’s media, Leduc connects the fight for disability justice to the growth of modern, magical stories, and argues for increased awareness and acceptance of that which is other—helping us to see and celebrate the magic inherent in different bodies.

Amanda Leduc poses in *Disfigured*, “Why, in all of these stories about someone who wants to become and be someone else, was it always the individual who needed to change, never the world?” (79). Diagnosed with cerebral palsy at the age of three, she, an avid Disney lover, underwent multiple surgeries at the age of four. This was followed by a wheelchair, her classmates initially curious about the different girl with different legs. But it wasn’t long before this curiosity faded and was replaced by rejection.

Now the communications director of The Festival of Literary Diversity (FOLD), Leduc investigates the intersection between disability and her beloved fairy tales, questioning the constructs of these stories and where her place is, as a disabled woman, among those narratives.

So, for a young girl with cerebral palsy, would this mean Leduc could only have her happy ending if she had normal legs? Were her legs merely a moral lesson that disability is the underworld from which the hero must escape? For Leduc, Disney's *The Little Mermaid* resounded with her the most. A young mermaid wanting legs built to run and dance reflected Leduc's own desire for abled legs, just like the legs of those around her. Acceptable, normal, healthy legs that would bring her a happy ending. And the pain that Ariel of Hans Christian Andersen's 1872 tale *Ariel* experienced "each time her foot touched the floor" mirrored Leduc's own pain. In the Disney version, Ariel's happy ending is the gift of normal legs as she sails off into the sunset with her prince

The Brothers Grimm's *Hans My Hedgehog* (1815) is a tale to which Leduc often refers. The King rescinds an agreement to allow his daughter to marry a half-man, half-hedgehog, out of disgust for the man. Finally, and after many years, Hans, the titular character, shows the world that he isn't half-man after all, but had cloaked himself in the disguise as a moralistic lesson. They all live happily ever after: the rejecting King, the helpless princess and the deceiver who used a monstrous form as a tool to teach his lesson.

Leduc emphasizes on the faulty messages these tales are really trying to teach. She stresses that in fairy tales, disability is used as a punishment, the strife out of which the heroes must rise, ultimately gaining beauty, love and a happy ending. The sleeping beauty who must be woken from her cursed sleep by a prince. The beautiful maiden rises out of an abusive house and marries the charming prince, through the luck of her dainty, perfect feet.

The Beauty and the Beast (2001) emphasises that a beautiful damsel can fall in love with the beast, but once she does, he transforms into a handsome prince who had been cursed into a terrifying creature.

Leduc illustrates how these stories teach us that disfigurement, disease and disability are often associated with moral failings, and that beauty and abled perfection is the happy ending. What would this mean for a little girl with cerebral palsy or the woman she would grow up to be? How would these moralistic stories frame her perception of self and her place in the world, and in turn, how would the world perceive those like her?

After years of living in this place of otherness, in 2015 Leduc experienced the worst of her. As she struggled to move through life, she was reminded of Grimm's *Rapunzel* and the

“desolate land where [she] was leading a wretched existence” (*Disfigured* 133). This struck Leduc as all too familiar: the greyness that can come with mental illness and the tower in which those living with it are often placed. They are accessible, as the prince is accessible to Rapunzel by the letting down of her hair; but who helps the disabled escape that tower and get out of the desolate land? She questions why do disabled folks have to be the victims in the first place.

As Leduc takes us through these fairy tales and the space they occupy in the narratives that we construct, she slowly unfolds a “call-to-action: the claiming of space for disability in storytelling” (112). But these are just stories, one might say. Leduc rejects this. “Fairy stories are not real, no,” she says. “But neither are they ever only stories” (19).

Pick up any collection of fairytales from Hans Christian Anderson to The Brothers Grimm and you’ll find story after story after story featuring disabled characters: “The Maiden Without Hands,” “Cinderella,” “Snow White,” “Hans my Hedgehog,” “The Little Mermaid,” “Beauty and the Beast.” “It is not surprising,” explains Ann Schmiesing in *Disability, Deformity and Disease in the Grimms’ Fairy Tales* (2014), “that a genre so often associated with magical or extraordinary abilities portrays disability with such great frequency” (9). Disability becomes a metaphor instead of a lived reality in fairytales. And this metaphor is so prevalent in narratives that it’s become practically impossible to find any current stories where a disabled person can find a happily ever after without their disability becoming eradicated.

In fairy tales, disabilities are often visited upon people as punishment, or used as visible markers of one’s inner moral character. Should a protagonist be made disabled at the beginning of a story, all too often their disability is eradicated by the end of the tale, usually by virtue of faith and hard work. A woman remains good and pious and has her hands grow back as a reward for her faith.

Here, something unnatural is made natural again by virtue of magic or God or simple human triumph—an idea that, carried forward into the twenty-first century, shapes much of society’s current thinking around disability. A fairy tale that ends with a disabled woman’s hands growing back teaches us, however innocently, that happy endings do not come to those whose bodies are unnatural, encouraging the assumption that all those whose bodies are different in this day and age must somehow be bereft of happiness. This thinking often leads to the idea that such people might even be “choosing” this unhappiness because they aren’t trying hard enough to overcome their disability, such as it is. Stories are never ‘only stories’. The fairy tales we know and love in the West—the fairy tales that became the basis of so

much Romantic thought and feeling and understanding of narrative—provide a crucial, yet flawed base for understanding how the world works. In order to build a new and better world, we need to move beyond these stories—even beyond their happier, Disney counterparts—and embrace a mode of storytelling that celebrates what might be possible—not through faith or magic, but through the collective work of acknowledging disability not as a flaw but simply as another way of being in the world—another way of being that has every right to participate in and be a part of society. This is never the happy ending that we get in fairy tales, but it’s the happy ending that we all deserve.

To sum up, the author reminds us that the stories we tell shape the realities of both disabled and able-bodied children, and about how we might make the world into a more inclusive, accessible place. *Disfigured* combines personal memoir, fairytale analysis, and disability theory into a brief but compelling book that will probably make you stop and think about things you have taken for granted. For instance, why does goodness lead to magical cures for disabled characters in fairytales? Why is happily ever after equated to beauty and able-bodiedness? Think of *The Beast* or *The Little Mermaid*. Why are villains so often disfigured or disabled in some way? Why is Scar from *The Lion King* reduced to his facial disfigurement? And what does it do to disabled children to never see themselves represented in the stories and films they consume, or only see themselves in villains or noble yet pitiable characters? When do we get a princess in a wheelchair?

The author raises important questions and offers a great deal of insight into where these stories originated, how people used them to make sense of the world, but also how dangerous they could be.

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