

Disability Representation in Media

by Lexin Zhang, for the Family Resource Centre

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Hello, my name is Lexin Zhang. I'm in the Youth@Work Program at Holland Bloorview. I have loved stories all my life. I believe in the power and importance of stories. They help form our ideas and opinions. They inform how we view the world around us; how we view ourselves; how we view each other; and the relations we have with each, respectively.

An accurate and diverse representation of people with disabilities in popular narratives is important. Being able to see myself in stories means that I exist in perceptions of the world. It allows everyone else to then include me in their perceptions as well. Being able to identify yourself in stories helps to further understand yourself and be okay with who you are.

I decided to make a list of disability representation in stories and media that I'm already relatively familiar with. These were all chosen with the issue of ableism and stereotypes in mind. It should be recognized that they aren't all perfect (though I am confident that accurate and complex characters will pop up in the future). I hope you check these out, and that they lead you to other great inclusive stories.

Book:  **Television:**  **YouTube:**  **Movie:**  **Theatre:** 

People in Entertainment

RJ Mitte (Cerebral Palsy)  

Mitte is most known for his series regular role, Walter "Flynn" White Jr., who also has CP, on the hit show *Breaking Bad*. Mitte has since appeared on the big screen in *Dixieland* in his first able-bodied role. He's also starred in the independent film, *Triumph*, playing a student who wants to join the wrestling team despite his CP. RJ also guest starred on ABC Family's primetime show, *Switched at Birth*, as the main character's love interest.

RJ was also the model of the “Lived in Spring” campaign for GAP International in 2014. He went on to walking in the *Men’s Fashion Week*, cementing himself in the fashion world as well.

Carly Fleischmann (Autism)

Carly gained attention from a news story in 2009. At the age of 11, her family discovered that she was able to communicate through typing on the computer despite being non-verbal. Eventually, she was able to let her inner voice out and communicate what it feels like to be in her position. She has a YouTube channel wherein she interviews celebrities on her comedic talk show, *Speechless with Carly Fleischmann*. She also has a memoir titled *Carly’s Voice*; you can find more information on her blog: carlyvoice.com.

Gaten Matarazzo (Cleidocranial Dysplasia)

Gaten is a young actor who plays Dustin Henderson, on the popular Netflix series, *Stranger Things*. The creators of the series wrote Gaten’s disability into the show; his character stands up to a bully and explains his condition in the pilot episode. Previous to his breakout role, he was Benjamin in the Broadway production of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. He was also known as Gavroche in *Les Miserables*.

Lauren Potter (Down Syndrome)

Lauren is known for her series regular role, as Becky Jackson, on the TV show, *Glee* which spanned over six seasons. The show explored Sue Sylvester’s relationship/friendship with Becky, and Sue’s late sister who also had Down Syndrome. They’ve also gone into Becky’s dating life in later seasons. The show’s premise is all about the underrepresented. Artie is also a character on the show that is a positive representation of being paraplegic. Both characters’ disabilities are a part of them but it doesn’t define their whole character.

Peter Dinklage (Achondroplasia - Dwarfism)

Peter Dinklage has an extensive career in the entertainment industry. He’s most critically acclaimed for his character, Tyrion Lannister, in *Game of Thrones*. He’s received a Golden Globe Award and two Primetime Emmy Awards for the part. Over his career Dinklage has been in a bunch of roles. Peter is also known for films, such as *Living in Oblivion*, *The Station Agent*, *Lassie*, and *X-Men: Days of Future Past*. Moreover, he is well versed in theatre, playing title roles in Anton Chekov’s *Uncle Vanya* and William Shakespeare’s *Richard III*.

Josh Sundquist (cancer survivor/Amputee)

Sundquist is a motivational speaker, an online content creator, an American paralympian, and a bestselling author. Josh lost his left leg to Ewing’s Sarcoma at the age of nine. You can find his motivational speeches, at various events, on Youtube. He also has video blogs on his experience as an amputee at youtube.com/joshsundquist.

His debut novel, *Just Don’t Fall*, was an autobiography on cancer, skiing, faith, and homeschooling. *We Should Hang Out Sometime* consists of stories about Josh’s awkward and funny navigation through love and relationships. *Love and First*

Sight is his first fictional young adult novel. The story follows a blind 16 year old boy who's going through a surgery that will allow him to see for the first time; all the while he's experiencing a first relationship.

Productions

Wonder [Palacio novel and movie (Craniofacial)]

Wonder is a middle grade novel about a 10 year old boy called Auggie Pullman. He has Treacher Collins Syndrome and a cleft palate. Due to surgeries, Auggie has been homeschooled for most of his life. Naturally, he's nervous about attending middle school at Beecher Prep. Over the year, Auggie experiences bullying but also friendship. His classmates grow to see that Auggie's more than his appearances. The book won the *Mark Twain Award* in 2015. It's companion works include: *Auggie & Me*, *365 Days of Wonder*, and *Wonder* (picture book). *Wonder* was adapted into a film, in 2017.

Spring Awakening (deaf actors & paraplegic actor)

Spring Awakening is an 8 time Tony Award-winning rock musical about teenagers discovering their sexuality. In 2015, *Deaf West Theatre* put up a revival production of the show, composed of both deaf and hearing actors. The show is simultaneously performed in American Sign Language and spoken English. The production utilized the lack of deaf education in the 19th century to contribute to the musical's themes of miscommunication and denial of the voice. When the production moved to Broadway, they recruited Ali Stroker, who became the first Broadway performer to use a wheelchair. Their Tony Awards performance can be found on YouTube.

Speechless (Cerebral Palsy)

Speechless is an ABC Studios/20th Century Fox co-production of a sitcom that revolves around a family of five. The show's creator is Scott Silveri, a writer and executive producer on *Friends*. The eldest child, JJ DiMeo, played by Micah Fowler, has cerebral palsy. He uses a power chair and a speech generating device. Fowler has also appeared in the film *Labour Day*, in addition to *Sesame Street*, and *Blues Clues*. The show explores issues and conflicts a person with special needs, and their mother, faces. However, it shouldn't be mistaken for a show about disability. Fowler's character has a sense of humour, and the show also focuses on the two other children as well.

It is important to note that there is a lack of disabled women, and disabled people of colour in media. It is a hope that they will be highlighted as this group of people gain more exposure in our societal narratives, moving forward.